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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SOCIAL CORRUPTION AND INDIVIDUAL INTEGRITY  
IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF SINCLAIR LEWIS

by



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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Sinclair Lewis' view of man and society has traditionally been regarded as too negative, the majority of critics concluding that the author offers no alternative to the world of sterility and corruption he depicts in his novels. This thesis attempts to show that such is not the case. Countering Lewis' awareness of social corruption is a strong belief that individuals of integrity can prevail in spite of the evil which surrounds them.

A social vision develops early in Lewis' career, and reaches maturity in the novels of the 1920's. Briefly, the author came to assign his characters to one of four categories, depending on how they respond to society. Carol Kennicott of Main Street represents that person who, though able to see and deplore the sterility of the world around her, is yet unable to discover for herself a personal alternative goal in life which would allow her to escape this sterility. Carol is a lost rebel, frustrated by social conditions she is powerless either to combat or transcend.

Babbitt examines the predicament of those who have been conditioned to accept society's false values as genuine, and deny their inner beliefs and aspirations in the process. George Babbitt is society's minion, a man whose every act is in compliance with the meaningless standards of his world. Though actually as frustrated as Carol Kennicott, he is neither willing nor able to escape from society, identification with which he foolishly believes is vital in determining his worth as a person.

Elmer Gantry examines the career of a social leader, a man whose





most salient feature is an all-consuming desire for power over others, unimpeded by any moral scruples whatever. Though Gantry and his type often achieve their ambitions, they must discard their humanity in the act of acquiring this power; as such, they too are destroyed and empty men.

In Arrowsmith and Dodsworth Lewis presents two individuals whose strength and integrity counter to some degree this corrupt environment. Martin Arrowsmith's personal commitment to medical research, as it gives him a sense of purpose in life, enables him in turn to escape society and enjoy a truly meaningful existence. Sam Dodsworth also possesses distinct goals and ideals based on inner convictions rather than on the empty values of society. Though both must struggle for the freedom to realize their ambitions, the courage that proceeds from their convictions enables them to succeed.

Though the bulk of Lewis' later novels restate his belief in men of integrity, the majority fail because the author tended increasingly to ignore the difficulties involved in escaping society's influence; as such, the books are weak and unconvincing. However, despite his many failures, Lewis has presented in a core of novels a tenable social vision. As his concern with human freedom is a basic concern of man, independent of time or place, so his works have an importance greater than has generally been assumed.





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## INTRODUCTION

For many years Sinclair Lewis' critical reputation has been virtually negligible. Most estimates of his literary career acknowledged his importance in regional and historical terms but almost invariably concluded that, as a result of his intimate involvement with his times, he was rendered incapable of transcending through his art the milieu of which he had been so much a part. Joseph Wood Krutch best summarized this evaluation when he remarked that

Though Lewis had to a remarkable degree mastered his method, that method is a good deal like the one so successfully employed in the writing of many present-day best-sellers -- the method. . . which produces books that are not so much naturalistic novels as "documentaries," pseudo-fiction in which everything is recognizable as true but with the fidelity of a wax-work and no suggestion of any sort of autonomous life.<sup>1</sup>

Krutch went on to conclude that, although Lewis possessed an undeniable gift for mimicry, he was by virtue of this fact unable to broaden his situations to the level of the symbolic and thereby give his work a significance above that of strictly contemporary social criticism.

Krutch's essay can be said to typify much critical thought regarding Lewis, for the bulk of Lewis criticism has proceeded from this assumption; that the author's very intimacy with his environment contributed to his ultimate artistic mediocrity. Critics in general have thus preferred to discard Lewis entirely on the basis of this obvious limitation, and in many cases have ignored or overlooked the important but less obvious strengths. One such critic is Warren Beck, who in his discussion of Kingsblood Royal and its relation to Lewis' other writings argued that the defects of that late novel could also be found in his



most famous books. Beck concluded that Lewis' unfortunate intimacy with his subjects had ruined his work, both as realism and as satire: "Lewis is often praised as realist, but realism presupposes an objectivity he has never achieved."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, he is a "pseudosatirist," one of those writers who, "lacking personal integration and urbane judgment, [can only]/ oppose the aberrations of other men with their own caprice and largely out of their own frustrations or vanities."<sup>3</sup> To Beck, Lewis was vastly overrated as a writer and had grown only more reckless and irresponsible as he aged.

Other, more sympathetic reviewers, seeing that a wholesale rejection of Lewis is as unwarranted as is unqualified praise, attempted to defend him on the basis of the very weaknesses exposed by his hostile critics. As far back as 1928 T. K. Whipple employed this approach, observing that Lewis' very inability to sympathize with life, to embrace experience from a standpoint of sensitivity and understanding, was somewhat ironically the best proof of the validity of the spiritually-dead world his novels portrayed. If Lewis lacked values, the argument ran, it was because his environment had suppressed such values to the extent that even the novelist was ignorant of their existence. Whipple cryptically concluded by saying that "Lewis is the most successful critic of American society because he is himself the best proof that his charges are just."<sup>4</sup>

More recently Mark Schorer, Lewis' great biographer, applied Whipple's premisses to Elmer Gantry, a book which he believed was typical of Lewis' work in general. Schorer showed that the picture of total sterility in the novel, its most singular feature, was also in fact its most important message. The absence of any perspective, of any alternative to the spiritual wasteland which is the whole of Elmer Gantry, is the





very factor which gives the book its strength and power. Remarking that "the primary fact in Lewis's method is the absence of conflict between genuine orders of value,"<sup>5</sup> Schorer goes on to conclude that "yet, out of this very weakness /of method/, cumulatively, arises again the whole impression of bare brutality which is, after all, the essential social observation."<sup>6</sup> The book succeeds by virtue of its own inadequacies, as it were.

In spite of this intriguing defence of Lewis, Schorer sees that the success of Elmer Gantry or for that matter of any Lewis novel must of necessity be in these terms a qualified one, and he is careful to add that there is still an ultimate flaw from which Lewis cannot escape. Simply expressed, his books "tell us too much of why we are dead and not enough of how we can live."<sup>7</sup> In short, Lewis deals in "half-truths"; though everything he says is accurate, the spiritual values in life are all but totally omitted from his work. The absence of these qualities renders Lewis' artistic vision, in Schorer's opinion, incomplete.

It is the contention of this thesis that such is not the case. Lewis did in fact possess an entire view of human life and society, insofar as he does offer the reader generally viable alternatives to the sterile world he portrayed. His general concern is not only with social corruption and its effects on man but also with the means whereby an individual can maintain personal integrity in the midst of this decayed social milieu. This view of man and society is expressed through the presentation of certain major character-types who embody responses to life which Lewis believed were basic. Appearing even in the earliest novels, they form the basis of the famous works of the 1920's and can be seen in part in most of his later novels as well.





Most characters in the major novels can be divided into four main groups. On the extreme are encountered the leaders of a corrupt and spiritually valueless world who initiate and further the debasement of all that is meaningful in life. Generally found residing in supervisory positions, their principal function in life is to perpetuate their positions of power, wealth and status through the eliciting of loyalty, conformity and obedience from the mass of men who serve their interests. In the early work representatives of this group appear in the form of employers, college deans, or revered relatives. Later they are seen as managers of religious, financial or cultural institutions. As such, they are remote from everyday life and with the odd exception appear only incidentally in the novels; their influence is felt rather than directly experienced.

The second -- and largest -- group of characters consists of those persons who have been gulled into accepting their subservient positions in life. Unthinkingly they accept without reservation the intrinsic benevolence of their masters and those institutions in society which protect and perpetuate the ruling classes' position in the community. Representatives of this second group sacrifice all to society; their identity, individuality and humanity have been lost. To conform is the whole of their morality; their every movement, at work or at leisure, is dictated to them by society's leaders. Lewis' bohemians, pseudo-intellectuals and snobs fall into this category as well, for their lifestyles have similarly been determined by societal factors. All members of this group live inauthentic, programmed existences, and as such are dehumanized.



A third group, and one which Lewis genuinely pities, consists of those persons who possess sufficient sensitivity to see society as corrupt, but lacking in personal strength and inner convictions they find themselves bound unwillingly to a world which engulfs them by virtue of its apparent all-pervasiveness. Unable as they are to embrace a legitimate alternative life-plan, their frustration generally gives way to listlessness and despair. Always they are destroyed, because society has denied them a belief in themselves, a belief which Lewis felt was of paramount importance if an individual is to succeed meaningfully in life.

Were Lewis' vision of man and society to stop at this point, he would indeed merit the censure of those critics such as Schorer who condemned him for his excessive pessimism. However, he presents us with yet another response to life which suggests that honesty and integrity can be maintained if virtually all contact with society is severed. Some form of physical or mental escape from the enslavement to social conventions and mores is always offered by Lewis as a means of liberating the suppressed self; only then can a personal and truly viable set of values be discovered. As this is an intensely personal experience, there can be no one answer for Lewis, and in refusing to supply one he has incurred the charge of vagueness and imprecision; it will be seen, however, that Lewis' very "vagueness" is basic to his belief in individuality. There can be no stereotyped solution for all men, and comments such as Geismar's, to the effect that Lewis' only true hero was the scientist, will be seen to be inaccurate.<sup>8</sup>

The first chapter examines the above character-types as they first appear in the early novels, and demonstrates how they reveal the development of Lewis' concern with society and the individual. While the early novels





do not specifically emphasize the various characters as representing distinct social responses, they do illustrate the origins of Lewis' assumptions regarding social corruption and individual integrity that would dominate the major novels; as such, they are formative.

Lewis' five major novels are based in common on the premiss that the corruption in society can only be combatted by individuals of strength and integrity; each novel in turn examines a specific character-type in relation to the society around him. Main Street is concerned with the position of Carol Kennicott, the defeated rebel in a world dominated by soul-destroying leaders and their obedient slaves. Here also a true individual of integrity is clearly visible in Miles Bjornstam, and through him an alternative to Carol's plight is suggested. That it is not emphasized is indicative of the difficulties which Lewis believed one faced in achieving a life of integrity. The author's final sympathy for Carol, so often used as evidence of his naivete,<sup>9</sup> will be seen to be qualified by his awareness of her obvious deficiencies.

Babbitt proceeds from much the same premisses, but here the focus of attention is on the relationship of the conformist to his world, rather than that of the rebel. Accordingly, Lewis here is somewhat more concerned with specifying the perpetrators of the society to which Babbitt is enslaved, and the motives which inspire them.

With Arrowsmith the focus is turned on the successful rebel, the true individual whose sense of commitment to a personal ideal is such that society's pressures can be overcome. Here Lewis' main concern is with the presentation of various aspects of his man of integrity. Nor is Martin Arrowsmith unique, and Lewis takes considerable pains to show that the life of integrity he embodies is not dependent on his





particular choice of vocation; rather, what distinguishes Arrowsmith is his sense of commitment to a course of action of his own choosing and his ability to separate from society in the interests of achieving this goal.

In Elmer Gantry Lewis examines the forces responsible for the sterility in society. The novel is Lewis' only convincingly thorough study of a man who actively seeks power and influence over others. Elmer's rise to leadership status is motivated by external as well as internal factors; his personal adherence to the sole value of power has in part been caused by the world around him and Lewis, while damning his anti-hero utterly, does not make him entirely responsible for his depraved sensibilities.

As if to answer the charge that Martin Arrowsmith was unique, Lewis in Dodsworth dealt with yet another true individual. Like Arrowsmith, Sam Dodsworth embodies an integrity that is throughout the book challenged by society, personified in his wife Fran. Dodsworth emerges an independent and honest man only after he has escaped from and repudiated in the process his wife and the social mores she represents.

The final chapter examines the later novels of the 1930's and 1940's in passing and attempts to give reasons for Lewis' artistic decline. In the main, this decline proceeds from Lewis' inability in his later period to distinguish meaningful and important human aspirations from trite and often false ones. For example, Work of Art is a novel remarkably like Arrowsmith in plot and structure, but the hotel-keeper Myron Weagle's ideal in life is merely to manage a decent hotel; though he serves only to enrich the owners of the hotels he manages, he is treated in the same light as was Arrowsmith, the romantic and imaginative pioneer



of medical research. Since the purpose of the dissertation is to examine Lewis' concern with social corruption and personal integrity as a major aspect of his most significant fiction, this last chapter will not concentrate on the later works other than to show the degree to which they are poor imitations of the major novels, and why they fail as a result. It will be seen that, although men are still presented in conflict with hostile surroundings, the situations Lewis deals with are trite and innocuous. Similarly, the later heroes have become comparatively unsubstantial and petty figures, their antagonists mere straw men. Those clear distinctions in human worth among Lewis' characters, so basic to his original vision of man and society, have been lost or blunted and the later novels suffer accordingly.





## I

### FORMATIVE NOVELS

Our Mr. Wrenn was Lewis' first serious attempt at a novel.<sup>1</sup>

Although an immature work, even here indications of the concern with social corruption and individual integrity which Lewis would later develop into a full theory of man and society can be found. Significantly, all the major character-types used to explicate the theory in the major novels make an appearance at some point in the novel. Wrenn himself at the outset is portrayed as a typical servant to economic overlords, in this case represented by his employer Mr. Guilfogle. A "meek little bachelor -- a person of inconspicuous blue ready-made suits, and a small unsuccessful mustache,"<sup>2</sup> Wrenn is totally enslaved to the social system. However, though bound by the necessity of earning a living, he actually loathes his subservient position in life and dreams pathetically of escape as he contemplates his collection of travel folders. For Wrenn is both frustrated and unhappy; his "fear of losing The Job was almost equal to his desire to resign from The Job" (W, 7).

Fortunately, he receives a small inheritance which frees him from having to concern himself solely with his work; he begins to see how, through the economic necessity of having to earn a living, he had been duped into accepting his menial role in life as fixed and unalterable. Similarly, he realizes that the loyalty his employer expects of him is unwarranted, merely a device used to perpetuate his subservience, and asks himself "Old Goglefogle didn't consider him; why should he consider



the firm" (W, 17). This realization is important as it represents an initial casting off of those groundless social maxims impressed upon him throughout his life as axiomatic moral codes by cynical overlords. As he can now see the role in life he was bound to is meaningless, so he has begun to escape the trap whereby

the five thousand princes of New York to protect themselves against the four million ungrateful slaves had devised the sacred symbols of dress-coats, large houses, and automobiles as the outward and visible signs of the virtue of making money, to lure rebels into respectability and teach them the social value of getting a dollar away from that inhuman, socially injurious fiend, Some One Else (W, 29).

In such a system, any demonstrable individuality is viewed with suspicion by the "princes"; even Wrenn's timid longings for escape are considered dangerous, as they might lead to his rebelling from the life-style imposed upon him: "That Our Mr. Wrenn should dream for dreaming's sake was catastrophic; he might do things because he wanted to, not because they were fashionable. . . . Hence, for him were provided those Y.M.C.A. night bookkeeping classes administered by solemn earnest men of thirty for solemn credulous youths of twenty-nine" (W, 29-30). All aspects of life, it is implied, are under the control of the overlords who determine the masses' activities both at work and at leisure for their own selfish ends.

Possibly because of Wrenn's latent hatred of his lot and his desire to escape, the transition from subservient wage-slave to master of his fate is quite easily achieved. When Wrenn confronts Guilfogle with his resignation, his employer attempts subsequently to cajol Wrenn back into submission with high-sounding but meaningless appeals to his sense of loyalty to the firm. Though ostensibly the master of other men, Guilfogle himself is described as part of a hierarchy of overlords; he himself is at the mercy of yet higher and more powerful employers. "Mr. Guilfogle





was essentially an honest fellow, harshened by The Job; a well-satisfied victim, with the imagination clean gone out of him" (W, 33). He is, ironically, as enslaved as are his own subordinates, a point Lewis would later elaborate in Elmer Gantry.

Wrenn is steadfast in his resolve, and leaves his job, aware that in doing so he is for the first time on the threshold of freedom. Despite this initial success, however, Wrenn's indoctrination has been thorough, and Lewis makes it plain that Wrenn must discard society's entire system of ethics and replace it with his own personal values if full freedom is to result. Thus it is initially difficult for him not to feel guilty that "all proper persons were at work of a week-day afternoon. What, then, was he doing walking along the street when all morality demanded his sitting at a desk at the Souvenir Company, being a little more careful, to win the divine favor of Mortimer R. Guilfogle" (W, 35).

As will be seen in subsequent novels, Lewis places great emphasis on the need for an individual to break away physically from his surroundings if he is to renounce successfully the mores of his society; accordingly, Wrenn signs on a cattle-boat bound for Europe. The shipboard experience liberates "Bill" Wrenn, the individual unafraid to say what he thinks and do what he pleases. As his thinking has grown more independent, so more of his suppressed individuality rises to the surface, and he discovers a power and masculinity within him that had formerly been latent. As a result he becomes "Bill" rather than "Wrennie" to his shipmates, and wins their respect by standing up to the ship's bullies, despite his small stature. On the boat he meets another, more experienced wanderer in Harry Morton, who serves to introduce the previously timid and law-



abiding Wrenn to modes of behaviour which are to him comparatively unconventional. In one instance, they "steal" a place for the night in a hay-loft; "Mr. Wrenn had never so far defied society as to steal a place for sleeping. He felt very uneasy, like a man left naked on the street by robbers" (W, 64). Later, he is discovered and treated roughly by a stable-hand; painful experiences, but necessary if he is to learn about life.

In England Wrenn first encounters the affected intellectual Dr. Mittyford, who "wrote poetry, which he filed away under the letter 'P' in his letter-file" (W, 71). Mittyford is the first representative of a type Lewis would mock unceasingly throughout his career -- the pretentious pseudo-intellectual who prides himself as being above the common herd, but whose life-style is in fact more rigidly determined by the conventions of his peer-group than is that of the average man. It is to Wrenn's credit that, as a developing individual he can say "'I ain't going to even try to be a society guy with him /Mittyford/ no more. I'm just going to be me, and if he don't like it he can go to the dickens'" (W, 72). But he has more trouble seeing through the alluring but equally empty Istra Nash, who becomes for him an embodiment of all the freedom from the routine and convention of his former life. In fact, Istra lives a most thoroughly stereotyped existence as a self-styled bohemian, but having just escaped the rigid confines of one environment, Wrenn has yet to learn that society is composed of many types of conformists; not until later in the novel does he see that an individual's identity must spring from his own inner convictions rather than be based on the mores of a particular clique.

Istra is to a degree a primitive example of Lewis' lost rebels,





those persons who, though seeing through the sham of everyone else's lives, possess neither the self-insight nor the courage to deal with their own emptiness. Usually people of this type, despite their facade of disillusionment, are shown as ultimately bound to their environment, accepting its premisses more deeply than they consciously care to admit. Thus Istra can see Mittyford as a "cultural climber" but fails to see herself as an equally pretentious artistic dilettante. Similarly, she can mock the credo of her friends and remark sarcastically that "'when a person is Free, you know, he is never free to be anything but Free'" (W, 99), yet she fails to see that she too is very much a part of this affected dedication to unconventional behaviour for its own sake.

Somewhat understandably, the naive Wrenn pathetically attempts to become one of her "interesting persons"; he attends her bohemian parties and fraternizes with her absurdly pseudo-sophisticated acquaintances; he buys "appropriate" clothing and orders on one occasion, "high tea", to impress her. As would be expected, he is patronized by her friends and looks foolish in the clothes; even the "high tea" is ruined by Istra's unexpected departure for Paris. Utterly crushed by her leaving him and dimly aware of the fool he has made of himself, he flees in despair back to America and a now-smug Mr. Guilfogle who, capitalizing on Wrenn's demoralizing experiences, frightens him horribly with the suggestion that he may not be re-hired.

Upon his return, Wrenn learns that Charley, a fellow-employee and friend, has turned to drink and is a ruined man. In Charley is the first of many such characters Lewis would utilize to illustrate a major consequence of society's tyranny over men. Many such people as Charley



can see the emptiness of their lives, but as they are basically weak, unable to embrace either an alternative goal in life or a genuinely personal set of values, they are almost invariably destroyed in their own despair. That Wrenn of course possesses sufficient strength to succeed where Charley failed is seen when he finds Charley (now an alcoholic wreck), takes command of the situation and looks after him. More evidence that Wrenn has emerged from his trip a more forceful and independent man is seen when, back at work, he distinguishes himself with an ingenious plan to increase business. Also, he makes demands of Guilfogle, exercises his judgment successfully, asks for raises (and gets them!) and makes a new friend in the person of Mr. Poppins.

Through Poppins Wrenn makes the acquaintance of other people who, though unmistakably bourgeois, are viewed in a favorable light for their honesty and lack of affectation. All live with Poppins at a boarding-house; Wrenn moves in with them, where he meets and falls genuinely in love with Nelly Croubel, a girl the complete opposite of Istra. When Istra, now home from Europe, visits him, Wrenn can now see her affectations clearly for the first time, in comparison with his new and unpretentious friends. Her desire to shock them by smoking, her request for "'a canteloupe and some shirred eggs and chocolate'" (W, 230) for breakfast, all serve to heighten the contrast between the two modes of life, and Wrenn is forced into realizing which he in fact prefers; as he says, "'Here I been forgetting Nelly (and I love her) and comparing her with Istra and not appreciating her'" (W, 237). Seeing that his attraction for Istra was merely a naive desire for the gaudy, sophisticated and romantic life he thought she represented, he can reject her for the wholesome Nelly,





to whom he can now exclaim "'I went over to the place Miss Nash is living at, because I was pretty sure that I ain't hipped on her -- sort of hypnotized by her -- any more. And I found I ain't'" (W, 249). Free at last from the superficial appeal of Istra's purposeless nonconformity, Wrenn is now able to determine his own destiny. Naturally, he marries Nelly and the two settle down to a life that, while steeped in domestic respectability and practical everyday concerns, has meaning because Wrenn has chosen it consciously by himself.

Throughout his career Lewis would maintain a basic belief that it was necessary for human aspirations and goals to be rooted in essentially sound, practical concerns if they were to have true value. Even Wrenn's eventual position in life, though very much a practical and even mundane one, is meant to be admired. This had led several critics to see the novel as evidence of the author's philistinism. D. J. Dooley, among others, observes that from the book's ending it appears that Lewis, at this stage of his career at least, subscribes wholeheartedly to the traditional belief that "opportunity comes to the man who is alert; for by the end of the book, the new Mr. Wrenn is on his way to becoming, if not a captain of industry, at least a subaltern"<sup>3</sup> with the author's apparent approval. Though much of Dooley's interpretation is accurate, it nevertheless overlooks an aspect of the novel's final scene which suggests that Lewis' final position is not quite so philistine. On his way to the grocery, the now-married and respectable Wrenn sees

across the ragged vacant lots to the west a vast sunset processional. . . . It had not been visible from their flat, which looked across East River to the tame grassy shore of a real-estate boomer's suburb. "Gee", he mourned, "it's the first time I've noticed a sunset for a month! I used to see knights' flags and Mandalay and all sorts of stuff in sunsets!" (W, 254).



Here Lewis may be tempering Wrenn's success somewhat, with a last reminder to the reader of the life of adventurous vagabondage he has cast aside. But more importantly, the above passage also indicates the author's position regarding the preferability of practical as opposed to naive ideals in general. It should be remembered that Wrenn is now happy, mature and independent at the novel's close, Lewis implying thereby that what he has sacrificed in terms of romance and adventure has been more than made up for, not necessarily as a result of his embracing a life-style admittedly mundane and philistine, but through his attainment of responsibility, maturity and self-respect. That he no longer sees "knights' flags and Mandalay" suggests that he has moved beyond the immature reverie he indulged in when in his entrapped state in life; in short, it indicates final proof that he has matured. In other words, the mood of the final scene is neither one of regret for the life he rejected for Nelly, nor is it one of praise for his particular choice of vocation, as Dooley believes, but rather one of respect for the change that has taken place within Wrenn himself. Now strong and self-assured, able to direct his imagination to positive, mature and tangible goals, no longer is there a need to escape through childish day-dreaming. As the emphasis is in fact on Wrenn rather than on his goal in life, Lewis can be called at worst only incidentally philistine. Throughout the novels, Lewis will be seen to view the process of maturation in much the same way, as involving a discarding of vague and unsubstantial ideals for practical and realistic ones; this Wrenn has done, and is as a result to be praised. Later, Lewis will view Sam Dodsworth in much the same way.



It will also be seen that Wrenn is not unlike later Lewis heroes in his eventual commitment to a vocation and life-style that he consciously chooses himself, rather than accepting the role originally impressed upon him by society; in this he is also like Dodsworth. That he is now acting for himself instead of bowing meekly to social convention is most important; even though his position at the end of the novel is little different from that at the beginning, there is a great inner difference in Wrenn, which is the point Lewis wishes to emphasize. Thus, although Our Mr. Wrenn is an immature and implausible novel in many ways, the major character-types and social concerns that will dominate the later novels are nevertheless visible even at this early stage. Initially a slave to the system, Wrenn has made the all-important escape from such enslavement, having moved through various levels of false and inauthentic life-styles to a final awareness of the importance of his individual self and its desires, values and goals. In contrast have appeared several empty, ineffectual rebels whose lack of self-knowledge and personal values have prevented them from achieving honest and satisfying lives. Present also are the Mr. Guilfogles of the world who seek to dominate other, weaker persons like Charley, who are ruined and destroyed by a system they loathe but fail to understand.

In a sense, Lewis' second novel, Trail of the Hawk, begins at the point where Our Mr. Wrenn ended, for here he examines the life of a character who from the outset is an independent individual; Carl Ericson's basic strength and integrity allow him to face and withstand successfully all social pressures to conform, in defence of his right to be free. Lewis' skills as a writer have developed as well; the events of the novel





are, for the most part, consistently portrayed and with the exception of the ending, the book is believable and realistic.

Carl is described initially as a "baby Norseman," Lewis adding that "the whole basic conception of work bored him."<sup>4</sup> The life of drudgery and conformity is viewed by the young Carl with contempt. Important also is his possession even in childhood of a vivid desire for adventure and unconventional activity, seen in his leading Gertie Cowles, his childhood playmate, off to seek their fortunes and away from her piano-practice. Their initial escape leads them into the country and the hermitage of Bone Stillman, "the man who didn't believe in God," who "read Robert G. Ingersoll, and said what he thought" (H, 22). Notably, he lives in isolation and little is known about him. Despite his supposed misanthropy, he is kind to the children and has a most profound effect on the young Carl:

Though Carl afterward remembered not one word of what Bone Stillman said, it is possible that the outcast's treatment of him as a grown-up friend was one of the most powerful of the intangible influences which were to push him toward the great world outside of Joralemon. The school-bound child -- taught by young ladies that the worst immorality was whispering in school; the chief virtue, a dull quietude -- was here first given a reasonable basis for supposing that he was not always to be a backyard boy. (H, 25)

From this passage it is evident that Lewis' theory of social conformity has become somewhat more complex; no longer do we find only a simple "boss" enforcing subservience; willing slaves of the system, in this case parents and teachers, pass on their own acceptance of society to the young. Lewis also suggests here that, were it not for mentors such as Stillman, even Carl might conceivably have been moulded into a socially desirable automaton.

As it stands, he is able to withstand his father, who represents



"intolerance and a belief in unimaginative, unresting labor" (H, 27) and his teacher, a "kind, honest, and reverent bovine" (H, 32). Though idealistic, Carl is also essentially practical, and defends horseless carriages and the romance therein; significantly, he does well in subjects of a scientific nature, poorly in English and Latin because they are impractical; in this he is remarkably like the later Martin Arrowsmith.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis often used women to represent the superficial appeal of the conventional life, aware as he was of the comfort and security that attends an existence of respectability and conformity. Many of his heroes are sexually attracted to charming but sterile females who embody these superficially attractive aspects of society; this enables Lewis to reveal in more detail the particular difficulties the individual encounters in resisting social pressure to conform. Eventually, he would devote an entire novel to a man so infatuated for a worthless female socialite in Dodsworth; however, even as early as Trail of the Hawk signs of this later concern are evident. Here Gertie Cowles represents one such average, conventional woman; pretty but bland, refined but empty, repressed by society and enslaved to its dictates, Gertie exists throughout much of the book as a spokesman for the conventional life. However, Gertie is not really a serious problem for Carl; he never has much trouble resisting her and the life of conventionality she represents. Even in the midst of his initial adolescent infatuation with her he can escape easily to the woods, where Lewis informs us "the world was deserted. But Carl was not lonely. He forgot all about Gertie as he cached his skees [sic] by the shore and prowled through the woods" (H, 47). Bone Stillman's life of freedom is infinitely more tempting than is the taming, enervating





influence of Gertie.

As a college student, Carl finds life there intolerably stultifying. While other students "raced toward their various goals of high-school teaching, or law, or marriage" (H, 63), Carl almost instinctively recoils from the pettiness and the conventionalities of his classmates. Fortunately, exceptions are encountered. Through Genie Linderbeck, another boy who is "different", he meets Prof. Frazer, the only teacher with an independent mind on the staff, who introduces him to unconventional thoughts and ideas which challenge the values of respectable society. Frazer is a genuine intellectual whose defence of freedom of thought and resulting defiance of society labels him a true individual whom Lewis respects. Carl is impressed by Frazer and enrolls in his English course. In one lecture, Frazer attempts to explain socialism, and creates an uproar in the conservative institution. Facing a subsequent class composed largely of his critics, Frazer defends heroically the right of men to think and act as individuals. His lecture is pure Lewis in its outline of man's duty to be intellectually honest, and Frazer's demand "'that you [the students] look about you and understand the significance of the industrial disturbances and religious unrest of the time'" (H, 91) is Lewis' plea to man to act from inner, unbiased premisses, rather than from those of society.

Impressed by Frazer's courage, Carl defends him vociferously, at the same time seeing through the narrow-mindedness, bigotry and intolerance of people opposed to any defiance of the status quo and determined to expel from the community, if not destroy completely, such rebels. Here Lewis is more aware of the power of society than was seen before, in



terms of its ability to root out and pillorize individuals discovered in its midst. Such is witnessed in the chapel-scene, when the President asks those who sympathize with Frazer to declare themselves. Carl rises, as do others, proving that integrity is not peculiar to one person. In this scene Lewis has crystallized the problem facing the man of integrity; if he is truly honest, an open defiance of society is mandatory. Nor is such a confrontation easily faced; it is much more comfortable to hide amidst the crowd and suppress one's beliefs, as does one of Carl's friends.

Carl is sent before the Dean and given the choice of apologizing publicly or resigning from the college; as the Dean upbraids him, Carl suddenly realizes that "'there isn't any law that compels me to sit here and take all this'" (H, 119). This awareness that there is no "law" or ultimate validity to society and its values, here represented by the college authorities, is an important stage in the development of the man of integrity. Like Mr. Wrenn discovering that loyalty to his firm was a mere myth generated by society to perpetuate his docility, Carl has also broken through to a now-articulate awareness of the arbitrary nature of social convention. Lewis emphasizes that the experience has been a positive, if not a happy, one: "he was slowly coming to understand that he was actually free to take youth's freedom" (H, 121).

Despite this, Carl's demonstration of integrity does not result immediately in a life of blissful independence; Lewis' optimism was not, even in this early novel, quite so specious as is commonly believed. He wanders aimlessly for some time, a social outcast, before embracing a career that satisfies his idealistic as well as his practical side. "For more than a year he went down, down in the social scale, down to



dirt and poverty and association with the utterly tough and reckless" (H, 127). This period of vagabondage parallels Wrenn's, and is important in that it enables him to distinguish meaningful work from mere drudgery. As Lewis says, "if Carl had never stood in the bread-line, if he had never been compelled to clean a saloon gutter artistically. . . , he would surely have gone back to the commonplaceness for which every one except Bone Stillman and Henry Frazer had been assiduously training him all his life" (H, 152). Thus, Carl is not debased by cleaning spittoons or tending a bar, because in seeing this side of life he is made poignantly aware of the type of existence he clearly does not desire.

Eventually, he opens a garage and develops further his mechanical talents. At an aviation show his latent ambition becomes crystallized and remarking convincingly, "'Yes, that's what I've always wanted'" (H, 164), joins an aviation school. Lewis' point is that he could not have made this statement with the same conviction had he not experienced a variety of unappealing alternatives. Also, as Carl's escape subsequently enabled his personal values to emerge and develop, Lewis implies here as well that he can now re-enter society safely, knowing that the strength of his convictions is more likely to sustain him in future situations where he might be pressured to compromise his values and ideals.

Although Carl flies publicly and is a type of entertainer, Lewis makes it plain that the crowd to which he ostensibly caters consists merely of a vulgar mob of sensation-seekers who are justifiably beneath his contempt. In one case the audience, ignorant of the technical problems involved, demands he fly during a severe wind; Carl accepts the challenge out of anger, but when in the air cannot help but regard them scornfully





"as men who had bawled for his death and whom he wanted to hammer as he had hammered the wind" (H, 185). Flying for Carl is an intensely personal experience; he is a performer only incidentally, and his flight in the wind-storm represents his acceptance of a personal challenge rather than it does a desire to please the crowd. Lewis adds that in flying there is a sense of purity not to be found on the land: "Oblivious of the clamorous crowd which was pressing in about him, cutting off the light, replacing the clean smell of gasoline and the upper air by the hot odor of many bodies, he examined the monoplane" (H, 197). Flying, then, symbolizes his continued freedom not only from society's restrictions, but also its values, and substantiates Lewis' belief that ultimate victory for the individual consists in transcending everyday life to the point where even the adulation of society means nothing to him. Thus, he is indifferent to the praise of the New Haven officials for winning a particular race; as he says, "'this hero business is mostly bunk'" (H, 216).

It is to Carl's credit that, having succeeded in aviation, he can move to yet another mechanical endeavour in the development of a "Touricar" (a car with built-in camping facilities). Initially, "because he was not office-broken he did not worry about the risks of the new enterprise. The stupid details of affairs had, for him, a soul -- the Adventure of Business" (H, 227). At this time he meets again the now-adoring Gertie who, though now a would-be artist and self-styled bohemian, has retained all her old provincialism; still the small-town spokesman for gentility, she bores Carl with her pretensions to sophistication. In this sense Gertie is similar to Istra Nash in that both women desire the supposedly free life of the artist without its correspondingly responsibility. If



anything, she lacks even Istra's degree of self-knowledge, for she confesses to Carl in bewilderment that she has been asked by her dancing teacher to resign from the school: "'She said that I wasn't practising and really trying to learn anything'" (H, 249). In fact she is a mere dilettante who in reality embraces the very mores which she professes to be above. What she actually wishes is a life of domesticity, in particular marriage to Carl, who sees this and wisely escapes, having become contemptuous of her "solid flesh, the monotony of her voice, the unimaginative fixity of her round cheeks, a certain increasing slackness about her waist, /and/ even the faint, stuffy domestic scent of her -- they all expressed to him her lack of humor and fancy and venturesomeness" (H, 306). Eventually seeing her as "an irritating foe to the freedom which he prized" (H, 364) he leaves her for good.

Carl soon discovers an alternative to Gertie in Ruth Winslow. She too is steeped in a tradition of respectability, but Carl sees an inner quality to her; she appears to have the potential to transcend the world to which her elder brother Mason, who "spoke hesitatingly, worried over everything, and stood for morality and good business" (H, 275), is bound. She at least can express a desire "'to go off tramping through the Berkshires'" (H, 278) (Gertie detested such activities) and admit of herself that she is a victim of "The Upper West Side" mentality, "'people born in New York who want to be in society'" (H, 277). Though sheltered, she nevertheless possesses sufficient sensitivity to see the pettiness of her life; what she has lacked, Carl believes, is the opportunity to manifest this strength and break away.

Carl of course provides this opportunity, and the two begin to





escape together; hikes in the country, symbolic of their independence, lead to a deeper relationship between them. When apart from society, "Ruth dropped her defences of a chaperoned young woman" (H, 290) and confesses she is very much aware of her empty past and uncertain future.

In casting off Gertie it could be seen that Carl had reached a point in his development where he was able to see through and reject all the more obvious deficiencies that attend a life of conformity, which she had represented; Carl was, in short, sufficiently perceptive to realize that life with Gertie would involve his capitulating to social convention. Ruth, however, is merely a more refined embodiment of that same society with all its pitfalls; this Carl is unfortunately unable to see. In fact, she is far more a part of the genteel world than he wishes to believe; somewhat in awe of her, Carl is blinded to the extent to which she too is bound by the conventions of society. This blindness on his part complicates the situation and adds a depth to the novel that it would not otherwise have had.<sup>6</sup>

In his desire to please and impress Ruth, Carl loses sight of his ideal of freedom, and without realizing it submits to the tyranny of "The Job"; "no longer was business essentially an adventure to Carl. Doubtless he would have given it up . . . had there been no Ruth" (H, 324). Rapidly he becomes part of a cynical, materialistic world where his original idealistic belief "that the Touricar might not only bring them money, but really take people off to a larger freedom" (H, 325) is mocked. He is told in turn that "'You can't be an idealist and make money'" (H, 325). As he loses his freedom so their walks become now confined to the city, and his scorn of the standardized citizens they encounter on the streets,



who "promenade like stupid black-and-white peacocks past uninteresting apartment-houses and uninspiring upper Broadway shops" (H, 325) is ironic and pretentious since he is growing remarkably like those persons to whom he feels so superior.

When Carl and Ruth fight over her snobbery, Carl is the one who compromises; more concessions are made when he tries to impress the head of Ruth's family, Aunt Emma, another arbiter of social convention in the novel. Lewis sarcastically states of her that she "was the general-commanding in whatsoever group she was placed by Providence (with which she had strong influence)" (H, 342). Having taken upon herself the task of rearing Ruth "properly", she is principally responsible for the latter's snobbery, and is superciliously contemptuous of anyone unusual and individualistic who even vaguely threatens the status quo. Carl sees he is treated as such a person; Aunt Emma "glanced at Carl, again gave him up as an error in social judgment, and went on" (H, 347) to chastise Ruth for her neglect of her "social duties". Ruth's apologies for her family's rudeness however are somewhat ineffectual, for she herself even wonders "'Will I really learn not to be supercilious'" (H, 355).

The question of Ruth's ability to adapt to the life of freedom Carl advocates is an interesting one, for Lewis too was dubious even at this stage in his career as to how likely such a transformation was apt to be. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the influence of Ruth's past will prove too strong for her to overcome. Her admission that she is attracted to Carl is made only after much coaxing on his part. His appeal has been solely on the basis of their ability to live mad, adventurous lives together, but Ruth herself admits that she prefers



comfort and wealth to the insecurity and possible poverty he offers her. For that matter, this very appeal is in itself specious, as it is at variance with the actual progress of their relationship, which has grown steadily more conventional. No longer do they go hiking, but rather to country club dances and musical comedies. Even when she finally admits love for him, it is merely the result of sexual stimulation: "But again and again she kissed him, hastily, savage tokens of rejoicing possession. She cried, 'I do know now! I do love you'" (H, 370).

From all this, one hardly expects their marriage to be a happy one. Indeed, Ruth is disillusioned when she sees him in an everyday setting; she "did not want Carl the lover to drift into Carl the husband. She did not want them to lose touch with other people. And she wanted to keep the spice of madness which from the first had seasoned their comradeship" (H, 379). In short, she immaturely desires to perpetuate the illusion of childish irresponsibility that characterized their courtship without actually sacrificing her position in society. Thus, "she taught Carl to say 'dahg' instead of 'dawg' for 'dog'; 'wawta' instead of 'wotter' for 'water'" (H, 382). They join a country club, play tennis and dance; Ruth plans all their weekend trips, social functions and outings, and Lewis remarks that Carl "had given all of himself to joy in Ruth" (H, 385).

It is no mere coincidence that Carl's obsession with work and his resulting nervous breakdown parallels the course of his marriage. As he is enslaved to his wife, so is he also to his work, which all but destroys him. Though he recovers, he is in a weakened state which Ruth has difficulty accepting. Appalled by the new, listless and all-but-





defeated Carl, she sees he "was not quite the same impudent boy whose naughtiness she had loved" (H, 389). Numerous quarrels result, and after one such particularly bitter fight, Carl leaves the house: "He wanted to flee. He saw the whole world as a conspiracy of secret, sinister powers that are concealed from the child, but to the man are gradually revealed by a pitiless and never-ending succession of misfortunes. He would never be foot-loose again. His land of heart's desire would be the office" (H, 401).

And so, at this stage, the book could well end, having portrayed the gradual decline of a once-proud idealist who sacrificed his ideals to the woman he loves. For that matter F. I. Carpenter did see the novel in this way, and concluded that Carl was "an opportunist who failed to realize the pragmatic ideal of man's conquest of the air, and soon lost sight of all his early idealism."<sup>7</sup> However, Lewis in fact refuses to pursue the novel's events to their logical conclusion and Carl is saved, albeit gratuitously, by the chance reunion with some aviators whose respect for him "made him trust himself, not egotistically, but with a feeling that he did matter, that it was worth while to be in tune with life" (H, 403). Seeing, once again, that the solution to his plight lies in escape, he returns to her: "Ruth and he had to be up and away, immediately; go any place, do anything, so long as they followed new trails, and followed them together. He knew positively, after his lonely night, that he could not be happy without her as comrade in the freedom he craved" (H, 404). Attempting to convince her of the need for this escape, he remarks that "'people don't run away from slavery often enough. And so they don't ever get to do real work, either'" (H, 407). At this point the novel ends, with Carl and Ruth and supposedly free, happily embarking for



South America as representatives of the auto company for which he works.

It cannot be denied that the novel's ending as it does on a baseless note of optimism and hope for the future is not really justified by prior events. The conclusion to Trail of the Hawk is admittedly weak because Lewis has made no effort to keep his ending consistent with the rest of the book; in short, he has refused to carry his premisses to conclusions which, by any logical account, should have been pessimistic. Nevertheless, though unconvincing in itself, the ending is consistent with Lewis' general view of society and the individual in that it presents the alternative of escape as a solution to Carl's despair. In escaping the dominance of his job and the influence of Aunt Emma Carl and Ruth have moved beyond their society and are as a result able to live truly fulfilling lives.

The novel anticipates the major work in that it contrasts an independent individual with characters who, to varying degrees, subscribe to society's precepts. Gertie, for example, becomes for the reader and Carl alike representative of social conformity; her stolid and unexciting person provides the main contrast throughout with Carl's individualistic approach to life. Though there are no specifically ruined figures like Charley in Our Mr. Wrenn, Carl is himself almost destroyed, and Lewis may be showing Carl on the brink of spiritual destruction to demonstrate in turn the likelihood of such a fate occurring to others, weaker and less fortunate than himself. Most importantly, Carl succeeds, thereby demonstrating a basic belief in the power of individuality, an ultimate optimism that Lewis would retain throughout his career. His world is far from totally bleak, as later novels which parallel this one in several ways will demonstrate. As Dooley observes, "the critics who see his





fictional world as a nightmare one are following the logic of his premisses to conclusions to which he took them only sometimes, not invariably; perhaps if he had been more consistent, he would have been gloomier."<sup>8</sup> To this it could be added that, had Lewis' art been more mature at this stage, the optimism in Trail of the Hawk might have been more convincingly handled. Certainly, the later novels such as Dodsworth or Arrowsmith, though far more dubious regarding the ease with which the individual can successfully escape from society, nevertheless retain essentially the same belief as that found here, that the individual possesses sufficient power to prevail. As such, the fact that these mature novels display a similar hope for man, and do so convincingly, indicates that the flaw in Trail of the Hawk lies not so much in the fact of its optimism, but rather in the way that optimism was presented to us. In short, in this early novel an immature Lewis, anxious to portray the destructive effects of society on man as well as reveal those qualities responsible for the individual's triumph, tried to do too much with his central figure, and made him both a failure and a success. The result is unfortunately unconvincing, for it is inconsistent that Carl should possess characteristics that logically should be mutually exclusive. Later, when in the major novels Lewis was able to make clearer distinctions between his failures and his successes, the novels themselves succeed.

Lewis' third serious novel, The Job, is concerned with the career-girl Una Golden, a woman who in many ways is a feminine equivalent of Carl Ericson; here, however, the heroine's femininity makes her struggle with society somewhat more difficult, since that society imposes even more stringent restrictions on its female population. Much of the novel is devoted to exposing the unfair treatment of women in society and, as



such, is very sympathetic to the feminist movement; however, despite his sympathies with feminism, Lewis did not agree that the sexes were completely equal in every way, and a strong belief in woman's innate desire to be wife and mother accompanies his sense that their inferior social position is unjust. Women may be man's equal intellectually, but are different biologically and emotionally. Thus, Una's attainment of an independent life cannot be at the expense of her basic feminine needs, as Lewis sees them; both must be satisfied if her life is to be entirely fulfilling.

From childhood, Una is surrounded by a world of conventionality and conformity. Her father

never used the word "beauty" except in reference to a setter dog -- beauty of words of music, of faith or rebellion, did not exist for him. He rather fancied large, ambitious, banal, red-and-gold sunsets, but he merely glanced at them as he straggled home, and remarked that they were "nice." He believed that all Parisians, artists, millionaires, and socialists were immoral. His entire system of theology was comprised in the Bible, which he never read, and the Methodist Church, which he rarely attended; and he desired no system of economics beyond the current platform of the Republican party.<sup>9</sup>

Her father clearly represents the placid, unthinking mass-mind, whose acceptance of society has involved a sacrifice of his aesthetic sense, his morality, and his belief in the value of individual man. Mrs. Golden is essentially the same as her husband, if not even more contemptible in her pretentious social aspirations. She is "one of the women who aspire just enough to be vaguely discontented; not enough to make them toil at the acquisition of understanding and knowledge" (J, 4). Her patronization of her husband on the grounds of his philistinism is especially ironic in light of her own. As would be expected, Una's parents attempt to force her into a life of respectability and try to pressure her into



accepting "that a woman's business in life was to remain respectable and to secure a man, and consequent security" (J, 7). But despite their efforts, Una is rebellious; like Carl Ericson, she is distinctly individualistic even in her youth. Lewis remarks that "she had common sense and unkindled passion. She was a matter-of-fact idealist, with a healthy woman's simple longing for love and life" (J, 5). That she desires "life" as well as "love" is significant, because it prevents her from succumbing to a typical feminine role: "she had been embraced at a dance, and felt the stirring of a desire for surrender. But always a native shrewdness had kept her from agonizing over these affairs" (J, 5). Desire for new experience is her strongest single characteristic; she "wanted to learn, learn anything" (J, 5).

When her father dies, society dictates that Una as a woman shall do one of two things; assume the respectable career of teaching, or marry advantageously. Seeing neither choice as meaningful, Una **rebels** and convinces her mother that they should escape to the more varied society of New York, having seen that "she was a creature of action to whom this constricted town had denied all action" (J, 16). Una is understandably at first naively optimistic regarding her future in New York, and thinks of it as a land of boundless opportunity. However, soon after her arrival at business college, Una can see most of her fellow-students as "earnest-minded but intelligent serfs" (J, 27). Her resolution not to fall into their pattern of life is an early sign of the inner strength that will later be her dominant feature, and suggests that in spite of her attraction for her fellow-student Sanford Hunt, a man who longed "for a chance to attach himself to some master" (J, 28), she will move beyond the world of subservience he represents.





In New York, Una has entered a soul-stultifying environment of which she is largely ignorant, "a world . . . whose noblest vista is composed of desks and typewriters, filing-cases and insurance calendars, telephones, and the bald heads of men who believe dreams to be idiotic" (J, 42). The business world has no purpose other than to perpetuate the power, prestige and wealth of "the bosses, who believe that these sacred rites of composing dull letters and solemnly filing them away are observed in order that they may buy the large automobiles in which they do not have time to take the air" (J, 43). It is "an unreasonable world, sacrificing bird-song and tranquil dusk and high golden noons to selling junk -- yet it rules us" (J, 43). This is the world of which Una is to become a part, a world that has the power to enslave all, even its leaders, to its meaningless and debased goals.

In her first job Una quickly sees that she has been relegated to the role of automaton. She "came to see herself as part of a chain" (J, 44) and is appalled by the impersonal, de-humanized atmosphere of her working environment and frightened by "the insignificance of herself in the presence of the office hierarchy -- manager above manager, and the Mysterious Owner beyond all" (J, 44-45) who controls vast multitudes with unimaginable power. Lacking in that self-confidence that will later initiate her rise above this life of drudgery, Una sees at this point only that "once she transgressed they would crush her" (J, 45). The "taboos" of the office add to the process of de-humanization; any deviation from the strict daily routine brings social ostracism in a structure far more rigorous and demanding than any army. For that matter, Lewis likens the office-employees to a vast army, suggesting that pressures are encountered in



civilian life to subordinate and sacrifice personality in the interests of a social structure as oppressive as that found in any military machine.

In such an environment men are often crushed; in Walter Babson, the advertising agent at the firm where Una is employed, Lewis portrays a person so destroyed. Babson's true talent for literary expression has become channelled by society to the mere writing of advertising jingles and statistical reports. He is as a result frustrated and unhappy, chained to a life of petty and meaningless activity. His capacity for spiritual growth having been stunted by his environment at an early age, he has emerged in adulthood unable to perceive a course of action in life worthy of his commitment, and possesses merely the superficial gestures that attend true artistic expression. Lewis remarks that Babson belongs to "the yearning band of young men who want to write. Just to write -- not to write anything in particular; not ~~to~~ to express any definite thought, but to be literary, to be Bohemian" (J, 59-60). He rationalizes that he is an author, despite his never having written anything of consequence. As Babson is unable to profit from his experiences because he lacks those personal values which would have ordered them and given them meaning, Lewis explains that "actually, he had no experiences, because he had no instinct for beauty" (J, 61), such spiritual awareness having been denied him by society.

Like other Lewis figures of this type, Babson has been destroyed by the system, which replaced whatever true artistic ideals he might have originally possessed with a vulgar materialistic ethic. As a youth, we are told "he read quite solemnly and reverently a vile little periodical for would-be authors, which reduced authorship to a way of earning one's





living" (J, 61). Society has denied Babson the possibility of meaningful spiritual growth by offering him only debased and vulgar goals. He has no sense of truth because society has all but completely hidden truth from him. Consequently, he cannot channel his creative temperament meaningfully, never having acquired true ideals; he becomes as a result an example of Lewis' lost rebel, who "looked clean and energetic and desirous, but . . . had nothing on which to focus" (J, 63). Nevertheless, Babson does possess one redeeming feature in his ability to see himself honestly: "But no one knew how bitterly he despised himself, in lonely walks in the rain, in savage pacing about his furnished room" (J, 60). Thus Lewis can pity him, because his is a basically honest soul rendered sterile and dissolute by the society around him: "Not Walter, but the smug, devilish cities which took their revenues from saloon-keeping were to blame when he turned from the intolerable dullness of their streets to the excitement of alcohol" (J, 64). Society, it is seen, not only destroys such a man initially; it provides the means of furthering this process of destruction.

Walter and Una grow close, but though she falls in love with him, she resists his sexual advances and proposal of marriage, prizing her freedom and potential future career over a life of possible convention in married life. Babson also sees that marriage might ruin her ambition, and tells her "'You're lucky, girl. You have a definite ambition -- either to be married and have babies or to boss an office. Whatever I did, I'd spoil you -- at least I would till I found myself -- found out what I wanted'" (J, 105). Perhaps his feelings for Una produce a new surge of strength, for he decides to escape his restricted environment



and try again to "find himself"; shortly thereafter he leaves his job and goes west.

Following Babson's departure, Una is released from her job and moves through a variety of tedious and enervating positions. With no Walter to provide mental relief, her mind becomes increasingly obsessed with the sole concern of her work, to the exclusion of her personal goals and aspirations. As a result, her sense of perspective grows dull and indistinct, her ambition begins to decay into an "unreasoning conscientiousness." Lewis, aware that she is in very real danger of losing her identity, remarks that on the way to work "there were a score of mild matter-of-fact Unas on the same Elevated train with her" (J, 115), all of whom have been reduced to pawns of the system, indistinguishable one from the other. When her mother dies, however, the event causes Una to see in spite of her grief that, now utterly alone in life, she is responsible only to herself, and at last able to embark on a life that will hopefully bring her freedom and fulfillment. This awareness of her isolation is important as it forces her to face life directly. Thus, now she can ask herself "'Why can't I really make a success of business, now that I can entirely devote myself to it'" (J, 129).

Correspondingly, she begins to resent the daily indignities of her life of drudgery; the tedium of the subway now makes Una "quiver with the beginnings of rebellious thought as no suave preacher could ever have done" (J, 135), as do "her noons of elbowing to get impure food in restaurants" (J, 135). The very presence of discontent kindles a desire for a richer, more varied existence, the first step of which is seen in her move from the apartment to a boarding-house, where she will hopefully make new friends. There she encounters the despicable Phil Benson, who



"would have been an excellent citizen had the city not preferred to train him, as a child in its reeling streets, to a sharp unscrupulousness" (J, 144). Utterly lacking in integrity, spiritually destroyed and rendered void of any principles whatever by his society, Benson attempts to seduce Una who, despite her loneliness, rebukes him. Fortunately, she moves as a result to a more congenial place of lodging, where individuality is tolerated; the new boarding-house is full of other women who have not allowed their personalities to be submerged in the drab routine of their work or in the drudgery of domesticity. "The presence of so many possible friends gave her self-confidence and self-expression" (J, 178), and renews her resolve to continue in the quest for a more meaningful life. Nevertheless, Una is still lonely for male companionship. When on vacation she meets the salesman Eddie Schwartz, his "robust commonness" appeals to her and she overlooks his obvious philistinism, his dislike of socialists, classical music, poetry and all but "uplifting" literature. Opinionated and boorish, insensitive and crass, Schwartz is a precursor of Babbitt but Una, in her loneliness, prefers to regard his rigidity of mind as a sign of strength and masculinity; in fact, Schwartz is one of society's minions, whose every value has been passed down to him by his economic overlords.

Una's new job at Pemberton's Drug Co. provides Lewis with the opportunity to describe more thoroughly the frightening power of corporations and their controllers to dehumanize men. Here for the first time Lewis delineates in scathing detail the sources of corruption in American society. "King Pemberton and his princely sons do not believe in all this nonsense about profit-sharing, or a minimum wage, or an eight-hour day, or pensions, or any of the other fads" (J, 222-223). Having no





concern for their employees as human beings, neither do they have scruples about the quality of products they sell to a gullible and accepting public. "Mr. Pemberton is the Napoleon of patent medicine, and also the Napoleon of drugs used by physicians to cure the effects of patent medicine. . . . He rules more than five thousand employees. . . .He is a modern Allah" (J, 223). Here we see the full, devastating effects of materialism and lust for power run wild; Una's boss, Mr. Ross, is a subaltern of the process, a man of no integrity who promotes the myth of business benevolence through his advertising promotions. Just as his advertisements are lies, so is Ross the epitome of hypocrisy and venality; Una "saw one of the younger Pembertons hide behind a bookcase while his father was talking to his brother. She knew that this Pemberton and Mr. Ross were plotting to cust the brother, and that the young, alert purchasing agent was trying to undermine them both" (J, 229). Values, morals, human integrity have all been discarded and are replaced by a lust for power and position that ironically brings no happiness or fulfillment, "but merely a constant current of worried insecurity" (J, 229). It is a world of the spiritually depraved, where intrinsic human worth is dismissed and an artificial identity, that of one's status in the company, becomes all-important. "Caste at Pemberton's was as clearly defined as ranks in an army" (J, 230). The leaders are spoken of as an Olympian council, "divinities to whom the lesser clerks had never dared to speak" (J, 230). Truly awesome is their power, for they are in complete control, having destroyed their employees' souls and created in the process a race of automatons.

Below the leaders are the willing slaves, unthinking in their adherence to this dehumanized world. These are the "bright young men who would some day have the chance to be beatified into chiefs. . . , /who/"



believed enormously in the virtue of spreading the blessings of Pemberton's patent medicines; they worshiped /sic/ the house policy" (J, 231). They vow "to adhere to the true faith of Pemberton's, and not waste their evenings in making love, or reading fiction, or hearing music, but to read diligently about soap and syrups and window displays, and to keep firmly before them the vision of fifteen thousand dollars a year" (J, 231). Lewis likens it to a religion, and in a perverse sense it is, having become the dominant concern of millions of spiritually blinded souls.

Beneath the leaders and their proteges are those who have failed even within the system's definition of success, and at absolute bottom are the secretaries who, as they possess no status and power since their money-making potential is minimal, are regarded as having no human worth whatever. It is important to realize that the system, based as it is on the premiss that human worth is of subordinate importance to the attainment of basically materialistic goals, requires almost by definition its employees to give up their every spiritual value and belief if they are to succeed in this environment, which denies the importance of spirituality in man.

Una sees as well that the system is perpetuated by the resigned acceptance of the employees to their lot in life. No change can ever be possible

so long as the workers accepted the testimony of paid spokesmen like S. Herbert Ross to the effect that they were contented and happy, rather than the evidence of their own wincing nerves to the effect that they lived in a polite version of hell. . . . She was more and more certain that the workers weren't discontented enough; that they were too patient with lives insecure and tedious. (J, 236)

The victims are "patient" because their indoctrination has been so complete that no alternatives are visible to them.

Immersed in such surroundings, it is little wonder that an increas-



ingly desperate Una feels "she had no release in sight save the affably dull Mr. Julius Edward Schwirtz" (J, 234). What Una prefers not to see, of course, is that Schwirtz embodies in his conservatism and insensitivity the very thinking responsible for causing and perpetuating the process of dehumanization from which she ironically desires his protection. However, soon after their marriage, Schwirtz's vulgarity becomes more obvious; he is crude and unfeeling sexually; he drinks continually to excess; he has lied to her about his being wealthy and successful. All of this forces Una to admit that Schwirtz is in fact a poor alternative to her previous position at Pemberton's. Soon fired from his job, Schwirtz degenerates even further, becoming a grotesque, whining, self-pitying creature. As he grows even more gross and disgusting, however, Una's corresponding contempt for him renews her resolve to seek independence once again. Soon their poverty forces her not-unwillingly back into the business world. Employed now by Truax and Fein, a real estate company, she encounters a more humane office atmosphere. Mr. Fein, the junior partner, counters to a degree the more acquisitive, less scrupulous spirit of his senior colleague. Because her new position is not oppressive, Una develops a genuine loyalty to the place, and begins to study the intricacies of real estate, which will eventually prove to be her medium of escape. As Dooley says, "Lewis was capable of describing business as the highest form of human activity"<sup>10</sup> at this stage in his career, at least in theory. Meeting a successful business woman increases Una's desire for independence; soon she is given a chance to prove herself and does so, significantly after leaving Schwirtz, whose presence embodied all the restrictions of a conservative society.

As if to counter the logical criticism to the effect that Una has





embraced, in her new business career, the very world she had earlier desired escape from, Lewis informs us through Mr. Fein what is in fact the novel's essential message; that a person need not be himself inhuman even though he should live within a dehumanized society. Most importantly, Fein advises Una that "'living in a world that's raw and crude, all you can do is to be honest and not worry'" (J, 309). In short, he holds out the possibility that man can retain his integrity while remaining ostensibly within the system; it will, of course, be seen that Lewis held out essentially this same hope throughout his career. Certainly, we are meant to see Una's success as not involving a sacrifice of her inner principles; she has risen honestly, and her ultimate triumph is clearly deserved. Nor has she sacrificed her desires and aspirations as a woman in the interests of advancing her career. For Walter Babson suddenly reappears, now ironically as her assistant, and together they agree to share the best of both possible worlds. Both will work. Una will give up neither her career nor her femininity, and the book closes with life promising her a meaningful future, her success in business assured, her womanhood fulfilled.

Critics were quick to see the deficiencies in the novel's ending. While in agreement with Geismar the The Job "is the best and solidest example of Lewis's early realism,"<sup>11</sup> the somewhat artificial inclusion of a romantic, happy conclusion was thought to be inconsistent. As Percy Boynton remarked, the book had a too-pat solution: "for the Woman-in-Business comes into her own when life permits her to retain her job and gives her a baby to boot; but the idiom is an unhappy one, and the story ends too soon. More exactly, life promises her a baby to neglect."<sup>12</sup> To this observation it could be added that the likelihood of a neglected and jealous husband and a marriage of ultimate frustration and collapse



are also distinct possibilities.

Inconsistent though the ending may be, and somewhat unfortunate also the mode of freedom chosen by Lewis for Una,<sup>13</sup> it can be seen that The Job elaborates the author's theories of man and society to a considerable degree, and does so on the whole realistically. The novel contains extensive and convincing descriptions of the process whereby powerful economic masters control their hordes of unquestioning servants and frustrate all but the strongest efforts to escape this control. Lewis also suggests here that integrity can be maintained in spite of such surroundings, if one's independence from society can be successfully retained. That Una possesses this necessary independence of spirit is seen in her successive escapes from the influence of her parents and her childhood environment, her various dull and stultifying jobs, and finally from a sterile marriage, to a life of fulfillment. Her belief in the value of herself as an individual and her recognition of the importance of asserting this individuality is shared in full by Lewis; her eventual success is accordingly a clear indication that in the author's mind the possibilities for personal fulfillment are always open to those persons whose strength and integrity enable them to reject the demands of society and aspire to meaningful goals of their own choosing.



## II

### CAROL KENNICOTT: THE LOST REBEL

In the years following the completion of The Job and prior to the appearance of Main Street Lewis produced two light, romantic novels of little consequence.<sup>1</sup> If anything, they strengthened the opinion that the author was an incurable sentimentalist who possessed an uncritical view of life. However, when Main Street appeared in 1920, this estimation was seen to be inadequate; as Grebstein remarks, "there can be no doubt that this is a different Lewis speaking; he is now the realist and satirist and no longer the romancer."<sup>2</sup> Here the outlook on life that would dominate the novels of Lewis' most artistically creative period is plainly visible. Here the protagonist, Carol Kennicott, is set against a repressive, stultifying environment which is committed to a rigid and unthinking preservation of the status quo. At the same time Carol possesses neither the inner strength nor the positive convictions that are necessary if one is to withstand the pressure of such an environment. Critics were quick to see this aspect of Lewis' heroine, but made the mistake of concluding that Carol's inability to advance a more fulfilling life-style was indicative of Lewis' deficiencies as a writer. Thus, George Becker can argue that "like his own Carol Kennicott, he [Lewis] began everywhere at once and turned himself, if not the world, topsy-turvy, without indicating specifically what he wanted done."<sup>3</sup> Granville Hicks, however, seeing that "Lewis, though he was in full sympathy with the rebellion [of Carol], was aware of its negative character,"<sup>4</sup> went on to point out that "Carol





Kennicott never knows why she is rebelling; she is against the values of the conformists, but her own values are nebulous."<sup>5</sup> She is from the outset a lost rebel whose critical faculties provide insight into the true nature of society, but whose nihilism dooms her to a life of frustrated inactivity.

Main Street was also written to combat the historical portrayal of village society as a bastion of democracy, freedom and genuine individuality. Traditionally, as Carl Van Doren points out, American writers had extolled the virtues of the small town while ignoring its less attractive features:

For nearly half a century native literature had been faithful to the cult of the village, celebrating its delicate merits with sentimental affection and with unwearied interest digging into odd corners of the country for persons and incidents illustrative of the essential goodness and heroism which, so the doctrine ran, lie beneath unexciting surfaces.<sup>6</sup>

However, a new generation of novelists came to see how specious and inadequate such a view of rural America was; writers such as Harold Frederic, E. W. Howe and even Hamlin Garland in the late nineteenth-century began to evaluate the village in somewhat different terms. Howe and Garland described the rural existence as harsh, bitter and often unsatisfying. Frederic went farther, exposing many villagers as petty, rigid bigots who demanded a strict conformity from their fellows. Of all the critics of the American village, none was as extensive in his condemnation as Sinclair Lewis, who saw the society of Gopher Prairie as typifying a general rigidity of thought and mind that he believed could be found throughout America. However, though powerful, this society is not universally destructive; under certain conditions men can rise above its influence. Throughout the novel the answer to Carol's plight as Lewis saw it, was obvious; each man's uniqueness, his personal goals and his



particular aspirations in life must be tolerated and encouraged if society is to change qualitatively for the better. This Carol never really sees; in fact her failure ironically stems from an inability on her part to tolerate any way of life other than that which she advocates. As she herself will see, she is in many ways as demanding of conformity in others as are the very people she is ostensibly fighting. For Carol does not actually believe in the value of individuality; as such, she is at no point able to offer intelligent and believable suggestions that would significantly alter either her environment or her personal situation for the better. Rather, she desires only to replace one form of standardized behaviour with another, equally deficient one of her own choosing. Where before dullness ruled, under Carol's leadership an enforced and artificial sophistication would be demanded. Lacking this necessary appreciation of individuality is the principal cause of her failure.

Lewis makes it plain at the beginning of the novel that our sympathy for Carol must be tempered with an awareness of her basic vagueness and immaturity. She is described initially as an idealistic and romantic adolescent, "a girl on a hilltop; credulous, plastic, young; drinking the air as she longed to drink life,"<sup>7</sup> in short, as a person whose youthfully naive ideals might, under other more favourable circumstances, have matured. However, Carol's development has been stunted by the conservative and repressive environment at Blodgett College, an institution which is "still combatting the recent heresies of Voltaire, Darwin, and Robert Ingersoll" (MS, 8). Denied as she is of the opportunity for genuine development of her ideals, they remain immature, as does she; thus by graduation she is still vague and indecisive as to her future,



having acquired no meaningful values on which to base her life. As she has no such mature or realistic goals, she retreats into a world of pure imagination and reverie, the better to preserve the naive ideals of her adolescence, cutting herself off from the real world and retiring to a realm of imagination untainted with reality. For example, on one occasion she decides to become a social-worker following a tour she has made of a poor-house: "She wanted, just now, to have a cell in a settlement-house, like a nun without the bother of a black robe, and be kind, and read Bernard Shaw, and enormously improve a horde of grateful poor" (MS, 11). Actually, Carol fears the intrusion of the real world as a threat to the existence of her idealized conception of it; as such, she retreats whenever reality appears to be encroaching upon this world of her own imagination. It will be noted at this stage that in her fear of reality she is qualitatively different from the stronger and individualistic Una Golden, for example, who was unafraid to subject her ideals to the test of the real world; Carol prefers the pleasantly-colored realms of fancy and day-dreams. On one occasion, her initial resolve to dedicate her life to village improvement pales when she realizes she would likely have to submit to the dreary reality of becoming a teacher in a rural community in order to actualize such an ambition. Correspondingly, she turns to library-work. Here again "her imagination carved and colored the new plan. She saw herself. . .the light of the library, an authority on books, invited to dinners with poets and explorers, reading a paper to an association of distinguished scholars" (MS, 13-14). As would be expected, her expectations as a librarian are soon dispelled by the more mundane realities of that profession, and she again grows dissatisfied, aware "that she was not visibly affecting lives" (MS. 16).





Carol's attraction to the stolid Dr. Will Kennicott is based on two factors. Certainly disillusionment with the library contributes to Will's appeal as a potential source of escape from her dull surroundings. More importantly, however, Carol's imagination is excited by his appeal to her to "transform the town" (MS, 19) in which he lives. Yet, despite her lofty ambitions, from what we know of Carol it is obvious even by this point in the novel that her efforts will be doomed to failure by her own immaturity as much as by the rigidity of Gopher Prairie.

Insofar as her vision of rural improvement, dating back to her college days, has in no way matured but remains vague and naive, it is no wonder when, as a bride bound for Gopher Prairie, actually confronted with the reality of her new home uncoloured by her imagination, Carol recoils in fright: "The width and bigness of it [the prairie] which had expanded her spirit an hour ago, began to frighten her. It spread out so; it went on so uncontrollably; she could never know it" (MS, 29). Similarly, when they reach their destination, she balks, asking herself "had she really bound herself to live, inescapably, in this town called Gopher Prairie? And this thick man beside her, who dared to define her future, he was a stranger" (MS, 30). Quickly she concludes, like a child, that there was "no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness" (MS, 30).

As her ideals are immature, so is she easily disillusioned. The contrast between her original expectations and the actualities of her new home is much more intense than it would have been, had a less immature and naive person confronted rural America for the first time. This is not to say, of course, that Carol's criticisms of the town are invalid. Rather, her very immaturity makes her an excellent critic, since the intensity of her disillusionment, though proceeding from her immaturity, renders



her awareness of the town's deficiencies accordingly more vivid. Lewis means us to sympathize with Carol's general evaluation of Gopher Prairie and supports her criticisms by presenting many of the facts which appall her as objective data. For example, in describing the town, we are told by the author rather than Carol that "it was not only the unsparing unapologetic ugliness and the rigid straightness which overwhelmed her. It was the planlessness, the flimsy temporariness of the buildings, their faded unpleasant colors" (MS, 41). In short, Carol's deficiencies do not prevent her from seeing the town as it is; rather they render her unable to deal with these conditions effectively.

Carol finds Gopher Prairie to be comprised of smug, self-satisfied people who defend their way of life with a blind and unreasoning conservatism. The bulk of the citizenry, she sees, have given up in the process their ability to think as individuals. At a homecoming party Carol "discovered that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie" (MS, 49). Rather, communication has been replaced with standardized comments regarding automobiles and hunting-trips from the men, while the women prattle foolishly over petty domestic concerns. At this party Carol meets an aging patriarch of the town in the banker Ezra Stowbody, a leader-figure who fears a loss to his once-dictatorial power. The old man, though still commanding respect, embodies values to which the town once adhered, but is casting aside, and he reflects:

Three decades ago, Dr. Westlake, Julius Flickerbaugh the lawyer, Merriam Peedy the Congregational pastor and himself had been the arbiters. That was as it should be; the fine arts -- medicine, law, religion, and finance -- recognized as aristocratic; four Yankees democratically chatting with but ruling the Ohioans and Illini and Swedes and Germans who had ventured to follow them. (MS, 51)

But since that time there has been a change for the worse, in Stowbody's



opinion. The old leaders have been replaced; now "the social leaders were common merchants. Selling nails was considered as sacred as banking. These upstarts. . . had no dignity" (MS, 51). Though Stowbody merely resents a loss in his personal power and prestige, he unwittingly voices a criticism of the times with which Lewis sympathizes. For American society as Lewis saw it was in a state of transition, becoming in the process increasingly vulgarized. In the past, the older pillars of society, with all their faults, had nevertheless embodied and upheld values other than the merely materialistic, such as the advancement of knowledge. But now the community's rising respect for men such as the bumptious, boorish Bresnahan (whom Carol will encounter subsequently), indicates that it is coming to relegate all values beneath those of wealth and commercial success; in doing so society has merely exchanged, with the passing of time, one value-system for another, even less worthy of respect than the original. This aspect of society Lewis will discuss again at some length in Babbitt.

Nevertheless, Stowbody is still a powerful figure. With his bank he attempts, with doubtless success to control the behaviour of those in his debt, and tells Carol "'Of course, if they /potential rebels/ have loans you can make 'em listen to reason. I just have 'em come into the bank for a talk, and tell 'em a few things. I don't mind their being democrats, so much, but I won't stand having socialists around'" (MS, 52). The particularly frightening aspect of these comments is, of course, Stowbody's self-righteous assumption that he has the right to influence the community to this extent, an assumption shared by the others, who "nodded, solemnly and in tune, like a shop-window of flexible toys" (MS, 53). To her dismay Carol sees Will as a part of their rigidity of mind, agreeing





with them that "'what they ought to do is simply to hang every one of these agitators'" (MS, 54).

Throughout the novel Lewis parallels Carol's inability to effect meaningful reforms with her gradual compromise to life on Gopher Prairie's terms. This process of adjustment begins almost immediately; initially she rather enjoys her new life and from then on "never recalled her first impression of Main Street; never had precisely the same despair at its ugliness" (MS, 65). Though her submission stems mainly from her inability to advance a meaningful personal alternative to the life around her, it is also caused by her failure to find anyone in the town sympathetic to her plight; loneliness literally forces her to conform. Although she meets many people, with few exceptions they have been claimed by the town, and are basically accepting of it.

One such friend is Vida Sherwin, a woman who has lost her capacity to criticize society from perspective; in Vida, Carol's eventual acquiescence can be inferred. Though she claims to be sympathetic to the concept of social change, Vida's desires for reform are all well within socially acceptable limits and, as such, are innocuous. Thus, she immediately proposes that Carol direct her plans for improvement within existing institutions such as the church or the library. Her own acceptance of society is seen when she remarks to Carol that "'I'm afraid you'll think I'm conservative. I am! So much to conserve. All this treasure of American ideals. . . . I have only one good quality -- overwhelming belief in the brains and hearts of our nation, our state, our town'" (MS, 68). Statements such as this are indicative of Vida's basic gullibility and label her as existing well within the ranks of society's unquestioning minions. As such, we are not to take her common sense approach



to reform as representing a genuine alternative to Carol's muddled suggestions for improvement. Later in the book Lewis informs us specifically that, although liberal in ways, Vida "believed that details could excitingly be altered, but that things-in-general were comely and kind and immutable" (MS, 249). Eventually, when married, she grows even more complacent and contented, and she and Carol drift apart.

Another of Carol's friends, the lawyer Guy Pollock is a man whose intelligence and sensitivity mask his inner weakness. Trapped by the town and unable to leave, he rationalizes his inability to escape on the grounds that he has succumbed to the "village virus", describing the "disease" to Carol as that which "'infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces'" (MS, 154). Having come to Gopher Prairie as a young man, he had originally vowed to maintain his interest in life, and on one occasion even contemplated escape. Eventually, though, he was forced to admit that he "'didn't want to face new streets and younger men'" (MS, 155), and remained in the town an apathetic recluse.

The degree to which Pollock is justified in blaming the town for his failure in life is difficult to determine; certainly the environment exerts an enervating influence on most of the characters in the novel. However, there is nowhere in Pollock's account of his past evidence to suggest that he ever possessed a basic, inner reserve of strength or purpose of will which might have saved him. Rather, we are shown that, like Vida, he is basically conservative; on one occasion he scoffs at Carol's defence of socialism, and eventually she "realized that he was not a mystery, as she had excitedly believed; not a romantic messenger from the World Outside on whom she could count for escape. He belonged



to Gopher Prairie, absolutely" (MS, 198), and, it is implied, had always so belonged.<sup>8</sup>

All the prying, inquisitive tendencies of the town are personified in Carol's neighbour Mrs. Bogart, who senses out instances of unconventionality and punishes the victim accordingly with her vicious gossiping. Nor are her methods ineffective. In one case Carol, having purchased new furniture, incurs a rash of shrewish remarks on her "extravagance". These produce the desired result, and Lewis informs us that "Mrs. Bogart had, by the simpering viciousness of her comments on the new furniture, stirred Carol to economy" (MS, 75). Later the full effectiveness of Mr. Bogart's cruelty will be seen in the expulsion of Fern Mullins from the community for her "immoral" behaviour.

In such an environment, it is no wonder that Carol's party, her first attempt to introduce the town to what she considers to be a livelier social life, proves to be a dismal failure. At the same time, Lewis is critical of Carol for her foolishness. To imagine that a single evening of unaccustomed activity will destroy generations of conservative behaviour and simultaneously produce instant liberals of her guests is ludicrous, and typical of Carol's immaturity. As Wagenknecht says, "No young woman so unsure in her aims, so naive and flighty in temperament, so ignorant concerning the nature of the forces opposed to her could have won the fight upon which this girl embarks."<sup>9</sup> On other occasions, trying to conceive more meaningful reforms, vagueness and indecision on her part invariably prevail, and we are told "at the end of all her vows /to improve the town/ she had no notion as to when and where the crusade was to begin" (MS, 87). At the same time, when confronted with a case of a family's poverty, an aspect of society truly demanding attention, "she did not know





what to do about it" (MS, 113).

To contrast Carol with a true individual, Lewis introduces Miles Bjornstam, who alone appears unaffected by the community's false values and mental rigidity. Unlike Carol, he is definite about his likes and dislikes; nor has he any of Carol's inhibitions when it comes to defying the code of respectability. Significantly, he alone is the "'one man in town independent enough to sass the banker'" (MS, 118) Ezra Stowbody. As a true individual, Bjornstam sees that the only means whereby society can be improved is through a cultivation of each man's personal values and a corresponding recognition of his true worth as an individual. Because of this, he can see the flaw to Carol's methods, and tells her: "'You want to do something for the town. I don't! I want the town to do something for itself'" (MS, 139). In other words, Bjornstam realizes that men must change and develop their individual selves if society is to progress. They cannot be changed, even by well-wishing would-be dictators of the public "good", such as Carol; this of course Carol, who has no real concept of individuality, cannot see.

An important distinction between Carol and Bjornstam is revealed when they first meet; significantly, her reaction to him initially is a snobbish one. "The Carol who regarded herself as completely adaptable was uncomfortable at being chosen as comrade by a pipe-reeking ood-job man. Probably he was one of her husband's patients. But she must keep her dignity" (MS, 114). As was mentioned in Chapter I, Lewis' lost rebels are generously bound by an unconscious acceptance of society's mores, seen herein Carol's almost instinctive display of class-consciousness. Even later, though she comes to like and respect Bjornstam, she cannot free herself from this innate snobbery, an inability which indicates a



lack of substance and depth to her rebellious nature.

Bjornstam marries and, becoming temporarily respectable, "renounced his criticisms of state and society . . . and was to be seen upon the streets endeavoring to be neighborly with suspicious men whom he had taunted for years" (MS, 224-225). The tendency to succumb temporarily to society is common to many of Lewis' individuals. As well as serving to emphasize the strength of the social forces acting on men, it has the effect of making these characters more convincing in their weakness. Usually, a woman can be found as the cause of this weakening, but they are not always directly to blame. In Bjornstam's case, his assumption of respectability is understandable because it is made for his bride's sake; the motives behind his new toleration of society are generous, and are not fostered by an intrinsic desire to be a part of society for purposes of personal gain. In this he is similar to Carl Ericson, and also may be said to foreshadow Sam Dodsworth.

Although Miles prospers financially in his new role, he is not accepted by the town, and soon realizes "that so long as he stayed in Gopher Prairie he would remain a pariah" (MS, 307). When his wife and child die of typhoid he is crushed, and returns to his original isolation, seeing that only in personal escape from his surroundings can he retain any vestige of integrity. He tells Carol, bitterly, that he intends "to buy a farm in Northern Alberta -- far off from folks as I can get" (MS, 311). Defeated in one sense, his grief has recalled his original awareness of society's evil, and in this final awareness his strength returns. Here there is no facile optimism attending the individual's escape from society, as there was in Trail of the Hawk, the absence of which marks a major development in Lewis' presentation of the successful



individual. Now, although Bjornstam leaves the novel an honest man, and may in fact live a life more fulfilling than that of a weaker character such as Pollock or Carol herself, the question of happiness is seen to be irrelevant to his maintenance of personal integrity.

Carol learns nothing from Bjornstam. Still determined to reform the town on her terms, she joins the local cultural society, the Thanatopsis Club, Lewis commenting that "on her way over Carol had decided to use the Thanatopsis as the tool with which to liberalize the town" (MS, 124). There she hears all the English poets discussed in one afternoon, in terms of their moral lives alone. When her timid suggestion for a more intensive study is vaguely approved, she fools herself into believing that "her campaign against village sloth was actually begun" (MS, 127). Flushed with this "success", she begins to plan further; an afternoon in the library produces in her mind grandiose visions of architectural change for the town. "She saw in Gopher Prairie a Georgian city hall: warm brick walls with white shutters, a fanlight, a wide hall and curving stair. . . . Forming about it . . . she saw a new Georgian town as graceful and beloved as Annapolis or that bowery Alexandria to which Washington rode" (MS, 130). Lewis has little sympathy for Carol at this point and comments sarcastically that "all this the Thanatopsis Club was to accomplish with no difficulty whatever, since its several husbands were the controllers of business and politics. She was proud of herself for this practical view. She had taken only half an hour to change a wire-fenced potato-plot into a walled rose-garden" (MS, 130). The author is obviously satirizing Carol here, for her naive belief in the possibility of instant change is indeed ludicrous.





Naturally, nothing comes of her plans. To her surprise, she encounters citizens who claim they would not like "'to see the town that we worked so hard to build being tore down to make a place that wouldn't look like nothing but some Dutch storybook and not a bit like the place we loved'" (MS, 135). As well as indicating the complacency and philistinism of the townspeople, this reaction exposes Carol's childishness also. In a very real sense she can offer no genuine alternatives other than those of a naively impractical nature.

Frustration with the community leads Carol to abandon temporarily her plans for its improvement and she turns to her husband, attempting to appreciate Will's "rugged virtues" as a country doctor. Here again, though, she subordinates the reality of Will's profession to her imagined and idealized conception of it; now "she romanticized herself not as a great reformer but as the wife of a country physician" (MS, 173) and accompanies him on visits to his patients. Her sentimentalized notions are again quickly dispelled by reality; when Will must perform an emergency amputation with Carol assisting, it is she who faints at the grisly, but very real, spectacle.

As Carol cannot square the real Will with her idealized image of him, it is no wonder that their marriage quickly deteriorates. In many ways the easily-disillusioned Carol is unfair to Will, seeing him as typifying all the vulgarity of her surroundings. Lewis is much more generous, and plainly intends us to respect Will in many ways. He is a competent doctor, and takes the responsibilities of his profession seriously; nor is he acquisitive or mean in his relations with others. In many ways, he is as Grebstein says "the best, not the average, sort of man the small town produces."<sup>10</sup> What prevents him from receiving more of Lewis' sympathy



is his basic belief in village virtues, his general unquestioning of things as they are, and his lack of sensitivity regarding Carol's position in the community. Thus, in reply to her frustration and unhappiness, all he can do is wonder in bewilderment, "'why can't you take folks as they are'" (MS, 171). In complete contrast to Carol, the eminently practical Will has no romantic or imaginative side whatever, believing it all to be "moonshine". What sense of the romantic he might have possessed has been destroyed or stunted in its infancy by the Gopher Prairie environment to the point where he can admit only "'three classes of people: folks that haven't got any ideas at all; and cranks that kick about everything; and Regular Guys, the fellow with sticktuitiveness, that boost and get the world's work done'" (MS, 195). All rebels and nonconformists are lumped together as "cranks"; nowhere is there evidence that Will could respect true individuality, which is noticeably absent from his list.

That Carol's experience in Gopher Prairie is one of steady compromise to its terms is witnessed in the increasing banality of her plans for reform. From originally trying to alter the town's architecture, she is moved to attempt a dramatic production, with the community participating. From the outset she is thwarted; the "actors", desiring merely to have fun, turn the play into a laughably poor farce. Ironically, the audience enjoys the production, thoroughly convincing Carol of her failure. On another occasion she attempts to liberalize the library. As usual, she initially plans "to revolutionize the whole system" (MS, 226) but gives up in despair over the pettiness of the library board, which is more concerned with balancing the fines than it is with enlarging its stock of books. Nor can she hope for help from outside cultural sources. When the Chautauqua company arrives in Gopher Paririe, Carol expects (again naively)



to hear stimulating lectures and new ideas; instead, she finds the lecture-series to be a mere mouthing of the prevailing myths of society that sustain the citizens in their complacency. The troupe leader, for example, talked "with equal unhappy facility about poetry, the Holy Land, and the injustice to employers in any system of profit-sharing" (MS, 232). Only one speaker attempts timidly to criticize the town, and is regarded as needlessly negative by Kennicott and the others.

Life is made no easier for Carol by the presence of Kennicott's Aunt Bessie and Uncle Whittier, who arrive for an extended visit. Riddled with well-meaning advice, they comment on any deviation from prescribed standards of rural behaviour on Carol's part; allowing her no privacy, Carol "was never safe from their appearance" (MS, 239), and comes to feel as though "she had been kidnapped by the town. She was Aunt Bessie's niece, and she was to be a mother. She was expected, she almost expected herself, to sit forever talking of babies, cooks, embroidery stitches, the price of potatoes, and the tastes of husbands in the matter of spinach" (MS, 240). In desperation she attends the once-despised Jolly Seventeen social club, and later even attends Church as a means of escaping from the monotony of her life and the community's prying eyes, seeing that "she was /now/ part of the town. Its philosophy and its feuds dominated her" (MS, 240).

As she becomes more desperate, Carol turns to books as a means of obtaining privacy. From her reading she comes to certain conclusions about the quality of life around her, conclusions with which Lewis is in sympathy. She discovers that the discontent she and others like her feel stems from living within





an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-taught and self-defended. It is dullness made God. (MS, 257)

Carol also sees how the above mentality seeks to perpetuate itself by furthering conformity among newly-arrived immigrant groups. The once-distinct Swedes are rapidly becoming "Americanized into uniformity, and in less than a generation losing in the grayness whatever pleasant new customs they might have added to the life of the town" (MS, 258). Most importantly, Carol "felt herself being ironed into glossy mediocrity" (MS, 258). Similarly, she is also aware that pressure to conform is exerted by certain of society's leaders; "small busy men crushingly powerful in their common purpose. . . make the town a sterile oligarchy" (MS, 260).

It will be seen that in large part this awareness of Carol's mirrors Lewis' theory of social corruption and involves his basic delineation of character-types within society. The major difference is that Carol's developing social vision is a purely negative one; she is unable to imagine for herself or society an alternative mode of behaviour. This, of course, distinguishes her from a stronger figure such as Una Golden or Martin Arrowsmith whose dedication to a personal ideal resolves the frustration they might otherwise feel by making society's presence virtually irrelevant. Thus, although her criticism of life is accurate, it is incomplete. To Carol, her discoveries are conclusions; to a successful rebel, a person with positive convictions and the strength to maintain them, such a view of society is a premiss from which he can branch forth.

As Carol lacks the ability to see beyond this purely negative analysis of society, her conclusions overwhelm her, and all she can say in



behalf of a remedy is: "'The remedy. Is there any? Criticism, perhaps, for the beginning of the beginning. Oh, there's nothing that attacks the Tribal God Mediocrity that doesn't help a little. . .and probably there's nothing that helps very much. . . . But I'm afraid I haven't any 'reform program'" (MS, 261). Because she has no faith in individuality, she is unable to see that it provides a remedy insofar as the self-confidence that proceeds from one's belief in himself would immediately, by definition, negate the oppressive power of the community. A true individual can withstand society's pressures to conform because his sense of personal identity and his desire to achieve personally-oriented goals are dominant, having supplanted the goals society has attempted to impose upon him. Thus, when pressed by Vida to reveal the specific reforms she supposedly desires, Carol can only advance the "fantastic and nebulous" hope that the Thanatopsis might someday promote "Strindberg plays, and classic dancers" (MS, 262). In a way the answer is hidden within her reply; a society of individuals would indeed tolerate and encourage mental and cultural development. But Carol never sees this explicitly, a deficiency that accounts for her ultimate defeat.

Carol's lack of strong convictions of any kind makes her more susceptible to the ways of society as she has no values with which to oppose those of the community. This deficiency emerges during the visit of the lionized Percy Bresanahan, the man to whom the town looks for leadership and assurance that its ways are unparalleled. Earlier, Carol had been told repeatedly of the "famous" Bresanahan's local origins. Now, in meeting him, her first impression is of his "laughing down at them" (MS, 268) from the arriving train, almost as if he is cynically aware of their worship of him. Carol sees him as a "spiritual bully" (MS, 270), but



acknowledges a certain attraction to his power and dominance. Almost against her will, she feels when in his company "proud of sharing in Bresnahan's kudos as people waved" (MS, 273) to them. Significantly, she does realize that he is in Gopher Prairie principally to reinforce the citizens' convictions and prejudices, as she listens to him voicing opinions that will later be parroted by the local residents.

To Carol's credit, she confronts Bresnahan, and in conversation he admits a certain degree of personal hypocrisy, confessing that "'I'm not any defender of things as they are. Sure. They're rotten. Only I'm sensible'" (MS, 276). Bresnahan goes on to defend, somewhat inconsistently, "things as they are"; "He preached his gospel: love of outdoors, Playing the Game, loyalty to friends" (MS, 276). But most importantly, Carol's nihilism renders her helpless against this defence of the status quo, and Lewis comments that "she had the neophyte's shock of discovery that, outside of tracts, conservatives do not tremble and find no answer when an iconoclast turns on them, but retort with agility and confusing statistics" (MS, 276). At a loss to defend her position because she has no strong beliefs of her own with which to oppose him, she in fact comes to admire him somewhat for his strength of personality. But more importantly, Carol neither sees that Bresnahan himself does not accept the cliches he advances on behalf of society, as witnessed in his living elsewhere, nor does she realize that he has merely been attempting through his rhetoric to force her into society's mould.

In Erik Valborg Carol discovers a youth whose enthusiasm appears to mirror that which she once possessed. Having had much of her own intensity stifled by the town, she attempts pitifully to take sustenance from the energies of a person as yet unspoiled. Carol believes she sees





in Erik a kindred spirit, for he professes a similar desire to read and enrich his life. However, whatever potential for development Erik may have had has been destroyed by his environment. As a boy he desired to study drawing, but was channelled into tailoring by his practical relatives. His intellectual interests have also been stunted at an early age, his father having forbidden him the use of books other than school texts. As a result, his original aspirations, though genuine, have been given no opportunity to mature and he emerges from childhood an aimless, vague figure, full of unfulfilled and unsubstantial longings. In this he is much like Carol, and may explain the mutual attraction they feel for each other. As an adult, although he reads widely, he does so "with astounding breadth, and astounding lack of judgment" (MS, 328). Naturally, Carol prefers to see him as an "artist, sure of his vision" (MS, 328), a young "Keats", a "bewildered spirit fallen on Main Street" (MS 327), but in fact he is as indecisive, as unsure of himself, and as lacking in genuine ambition as she. For that matter, even Carol at times wonders if he was not merely "a small-town youth bred on an illiberal farm and in cheap tailor shops" (MS, 333); elsewhere she suspects he has a "flabby will", but dismisses these unpleasant notions, preferring to see him in her imaginative and idealized way. That he is not the rebellious, purposeful individual she would like to think is revealed on numerous occasions. All he really desires is to be accepted by the town; at a tennis-tournament which he has organized, she sees Erik "was happy in being, for the first time, part of Gopher Prairie" (MS, 334). Later, at a picnic he attends, Carol sees his "eyes begged every one to like him" (MS, 348). For that matter, Erik himself admits to her at one point that a career in Gopher Prairie as a miller appeals to him more than does the thought of going east to study



art, an admission which exposes clearly the lack of depth to his supposed creative ambitions. Final evidence of his philistinism occurs late in the novel when Carol, in Washington, sees him starring in a cheap Hollywood movie.

Though Carol actually knows that her relations with Erik are those of a "self-deceived little woman whispering in corners with a pretentious little man" (MS, 350), she rationalizes that their affair is meaningful, that Erik is "fine" and "aspiring". Though the reader must surely agree with Carol's negative assessment of herself and Erik, we are also meant to see that Erik fulfills an important function as far as Carol is concerned. First, he panders outrageously to her badly damaged ego, appearing not just sympathetic to her position but at times even worshipful of her. He never tires of complimenting her on her youth, which she believes to be fading, her charm, which she suspects has left her, and her personality, which she knows has been dulled by her years in Gopher Prairie. Secondly, in that he appears as a romantic young "Keats", he caters to her illusions of romance, and keeps her from facing the drab reality around her. All in all, his effect on her is far from a beneficial one since he contributes to her continuing self-deception.

Two major events precipitate Carol's eventual escape. The town's malicious expulsion of the newly-arrived teacher Fern Mullins and Will's exposure of Erik as a person of little substance combine to convince her that her life in Gopher Prairie has no redeeming features whatsoever. Fern has attended a dance with the worthless son of the malicious gossip, Mrs. Bogart, during which he became drunk. Naturally, the outsider Fern is accused of having led the boy astray. The charge is of course nonsensical and baseless, but causes Fern's dismissal as a teacher and



expulsion from the town. Carol, attempting to defend Fern, is appalled by the school board's cowardly willingness to accept the obvious lies brought against the girl. Nor will any individual citizens come to her defence, and Carol sees there is not one person in town with courage enough to confront the perpetrators of this injustice.

Ironically, it is Will who forces her to admit that she has been deceiving herself regarding Erik and his "potential", exposing her belief in his sensitivity and artistic capabilities as mere wishful thinking on her part. He asks her, "'What has he actually done in the art line? Has he done one first-class picture or -- sketch, d'you call it? Or one poem, or played the piano, or anything except gas about what he's going to do'" (MS, 382). Will sees "'that it's just by contrast with folks like Doc McGanum or Lym Cass that this fellow seems artistic'" (MS, 382); lost for a reply, Carol is forced to admit reluctantly that Will is correct. Her belief in Erik, she now admits, was born of her desperation and coloured by an imagination that has been her undoing throughout her life.

Realizing their affair is doomed, Erik leaves Gopher Prairie and Carol, unable to stand the ensuing gossip, convinces Will that they should take an extended vacation, but upon their return she realizes that "Nothing had changed. She had never been away" (MS, 393). If anything, Gopher Prairie has changed for the worse. No longer merely complacent, it has become even more zealous in its enforcement of conformity, and illegally expels a suspected radical from the town even before he has actually said or done anything radical. When Will justifies the act on "patriotic" grounds, Carol can stand no more, and leaves for Washington.

Unlike Lewis' true individual, whose escape involves a commitment to some form of meaningful activity, the lost rebel, if he escapes at all,





merely escapes from his surroundings, because he sees nothing to which he can commit himself meaningfully. Even Will sees that her intended departure is of a purely negative nature, and asks her "'Don't you know that nobody ever solved a problem by running away from it'" (MS, 405). When in Washington, she sees that on the whole she has not really moved to a qualitatively more satisfying environment; "she discovered that an office is as full of cliques and scandals as a Gopher Prairie" (MS, 408). Her life there is "an endurance of monotonous details, yet she asserted that she had found 'real work'" (MS, 408). That she is again rationalizing is obvious from her own awareness that she perceived "in Washington (as doubtless she would have perceived in New York or London) a thick streak of Main Street" (MS, 410). In contrast with Una Golden, who came to the city with a definite goal in mind, Carol lacks such motivation, and as such is disillusioned when recognizing Washington as "a transplanted and guarded Main Street" (MS, 409). Lewis' point in comparing the two environments is simply to draw to the reader's attention the fact that society's pressures may be found everywhere; only a development of one's individuality can successfully combat such pressures. That Carol lacks these inner requirements is evidenced by her aimless activities in Washington; "Carol never became a prominent suffragist. Indeed her only recognized position was as an able addresser of envelopes" (MS, 410). Although she has been an instinctive feminist all her life, when faced with a tangible opportunity to commit herself to the "cause" of feminine emancipation, she demures. As her life in Washington is just as purposeless as it was in Gopher Prairie, when Will reappears and tries to lure her back, she has no idea as to what she should do, and must seek the advice of a friend in



the suffrage movement. This person forces Carol to face the bitter truth she has avoided facing throughout her life, that she is neither "heroic" nor capable of "endurance", that her own lack of personal convictions of any kind have prevented her from meaningful commitment and activity in life. Possibly to soften the blow, the friend adds that, nevertheless, there is some value in an unceasing questioning of this status quo, but in saying this she unwittingly provides Carol with the excuse she has been looking for to return to Gopher Prairie. For, immediately thereafter Carol resolves to "'go back! I will go on asking questions'" (MS, 423).

Thus she leaves Washington, hiding from herself the fact that her return is actually indicative of her ultimate defeat, final proof that she has not matured; "though she should return, she said, she would not be utterly defeated. She was glad of her rebellion" (MS 424). As she had learned nothing, as she has in no way developed, so she begins as before to manufacture in her imagination a vision of the town that bears no resemblance to reality: "The prairie was no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness" (MS, 424). Essentially, then, she is unchanged. Her view of Gopher Prairie prior to her final return is tinted with the same idealistic coloring she gave it when she first arrived as a bride, and she is merely fooling herself when she sees "Gopher Prairie as her home, waiting for her in the sunset, rimmed round with splendor" (MS, 425), and remarks that "'I've come to a fairer attitude toward the town. I can love it, now'" (MS, 425).

Naturally, when she returns, all is as it was before; she and Will



are no closer despite her return. In fact, it is Carol who has changed in acquiescing to the town's standards and values. Timidity has triumphed, and a now-passive Carol spends time serving in the community rest-room she had once despised as a hypocritical device to get business from the farmers. She participates in her husband's activities at the expense of her own, attends movies in lieu of reading, and sits inoffensively in the back of his car with the other wives, "a woman of Main Street" (MS, 431). Feebly attempting to salvage dignity by rationalizing that she has at least retained her integrity, she exclaims

"I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith." (MS, 432)

That Will, barely hearing her, replies only with an inane comment about preparing for winter is, of course, the most obvious refutation to her claim of partial success.

Thus the novel ends, Carol having been defeated in part by the rigidity of her environment, but in the main by her own basic weaknesses and deficiencies. Unrealistic in her thinking from beginning to end, Carol is unable to see the truth and conceive meaningful alternatives to the sterile reality about her have combined to destroy her. As Schorer says, "At the end, having learned very little, she continues to see people only as she was in the first place prepared to see them."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Carol's inability to see herself is likewise inadequate.

Many critics have seen Carol's position as one of steady melioration. Grebstein, for one, suggests that the novel ends optimistically, and comments that "on her return to Gopher Prairie, having been re-won by





Will's patient courtship, Carol finds the town somehow easier to accept. She participates in a number of concrete reforms and is herself finally accepted by the town. In short, . . . Lewis has written an ending which borders on the happy."<sup>12</sup> In fact, the town's acceptance of Carol would seem to imply just the reverse. But Lewis himself believed her final position to be one of defeat and substantiated this belief in an article written several years after the publication of Main Street. Here Lewis, as himself, purportedly re-visits Gopher Prairie to examine how its citizens plan to vote in the 1924 presidential elections. In that article, Carol is described as "a woman of perhaps forty, a smallish woman with horn-rimmed spectacles which made her little face seem childish, though it was a childishness dubious and tired and almost timid. She must once, I noted, have been slender and pretty, but she was growing dumpy and static, and about her was an air of having lost her bloom."<sup>13</sup> Now an embodiment of Main Street's mentality, it is plain that an older Carol has succumbed completely to the aesthetic and intellectual standards of her husband and the town, and revels in the trivia of the radio and the Thanatopsis Club. She informs Lewis that it "'wasn't safe to experiment'"<sup>14</sup> and intends pathetically to vote for Coolidge. Clearly Lewis' final impression of Carol was one of a naive, defeated failure, whose rebellious energies have been utterly sapped; now all he hears is her "inexplicably sighing."<sup>15</sup>

Carol, then, is one of Lewis' most intensively examined lost rebels, whose critical insight is countered with a personal nihilism that negates the possibility of meaningful action. Unable to move beyond society, the rebel is invariably destroyed, either in meek acquiescence or through misdirected defiance. In subsequent novels, other lost rebels such as Paul Riesling and Frank Shallard will appear who exhibit essentially



the same lack of personal convictions, the same weakness of personality and the same inability to believe in themselves.



### III

#### BABBITT: SOCIETY'S MINION

Many critics believe Babbitt to be Sinclair Lewis' greatest novel;<sup>1</sup> without doubt it has been his most famous and best known work. The central figure, to the degree that he embodies materialism and conformity, has come to represent an entire way of life, and one which in modern times continues to appear in society with significant frequency. Certainly H. L. Mencken's comment that George Babbitt "almost completely represents the grotesque fabric of imbecilities that passes for civilization among us, or, at all events, among 95% of us"<sup>2</sup> applies to the present as well. Yet at the same time, Babbitt himself is more than a mere caricature of conformism; rather, he possesses a degree of sensitivity which, as it causes him to suffer in his situation and contemplate escape much as did Carol Kennicott in Main Street, complicates the novel accordingly. Interestingly, Frederick Hoffman pointed to this feature of Babbitt as its most glaring defect. Seeing "two Babbitts," he remarked that "the crucial fact about Babbitt is that it is two novels -- or two types of literary exposition poorly combined in one work."<sup>3</sup> Believing that the sensitive side of Babbitt "cancels the validity and nullifies the success of the other,"<sup>4</sup> conformity-ridden figure, Hoffman concluded that these two aspects of the character were by logical definition mutually exclusive; consequently, the novel suffered by virtue of inconsistency.

Hoffman's argument was based on an assumption that the novel





was purely satiric. Since satire's effect has traditionally depended upon a presentation of oversimplified and distorted characters and situations, Hoffman was led to conclude that any factor which complicated and added to the realistic portrayal of Babbitt, in this instance his possession of sensitivity, could only detract from the intensity of the novel's essentially satiric message. In fact, Babbitt's sensitivity adds to, rather than detracts from, the novel's credibility. That there should be "two Babbitts" is precisely Lewis' intent. Babbitt must be allowed a degree of sensitivity; he must suffer if we are to sympathize with him and thereby comprehend the power of the world which surrounds him. He must possess a soul, if we are to be made aware of society as a soul-destroying force.<sup>5</sup>

In Babbitt Lewis is much more aware of society's near-total power over its citizens. Comparing the novel with Main Street, F. I. Carpenter correctly saw that whereas Carol Kennicott herself provided a perspective and contrast to Gopher Prairie by virtue of her urban upbringing, Babbitt exists totally within his society. Escape is thus less possible in Babbitt due to the apparently all-encompassing nature of Babbitt's world. Here there is virtually no way whereby Babbitt can escape from society because it appears as ubiquitous, having surrounded him with its physical presence and glutted his mind with its precepts. Accordingly, there is only a hint in this more pessimistic novel of true individuality, since Lewis' emphasis is on society's having all but obliterated the conditions whereby such development of one's individuality can occur.

Although totally different in personality, Babbitt is not utterly unlike Carol Kennicott; in fact, his approach to life begins from the opposite extreme. Whereas Carol rejected her environment and damned it



as being intrinsically bad; Babbitt at the outset accepts his world unthinkingly and assumes it to be uniformly benign. As such, the two characters together represent the poles that exist within a sterile society that has stifled, with equal success, whatever potential either may have possessed. Babbitt and Carol are similar in terms of society's effect on them; neither can envisage a more satisfying life-style to advance against their respective milieus. The two characters also complement each other in a way. Carol, rebellious at the outset, was unable to channel her rebellion meaningfully, became progressively more acquiescent, and ended in a state of semi-frustrated enervation. Babbitt, initially a willing conformist whose rebellious nature grows throughout the book, is similarly unable to find a legitimate means whereby rebellion can be achieved, and appears at the novel's close much like Carol in his grim, defeated acquiescence. Both have been victimized by the same social processes that have denied them the opportunity for meaningful development. Neither is to be respected, for at no point do they realize the value of individuality for its own sake; both are to be pitied for the wastage of their lives.

Lewis begins Babbitt with an immediate indication of society's power and dominance: "The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings."<sup>6</sup> This subordination of the spiritually-oriented church to the office buildings with their materialistic connotations clearly indicates that the environment is debased. A product of this milieu, Babbitt's spiritual development has naturally been stunted. As the true religious spirit has been supplanted



by a "religion of things", so Babbitt's "god was Modern Appliances" (B, 8); consequently, a Ford is appreciated "piously", an office building seen as a manifestation of the "religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men" (B, 15).

Love itself is virtually nonexistent, having been reduced in Babbitt's life to a dull, habituated tolerance for his wife Myra, whom he has never really loved, but married nevertheless, lacking the courage to defy her complacent assumption that he would act conventionally by culminating their courtship in marriage. Thus, though "the evening before his marriage was an agony, and the morning wild with the desire to flee" (B, 76), he did as Myra and society expected. Bland and uncomprehending, feebly prudish and absurdly class-conscious, Mrs. Babbitt in middle-age is "as sexless as an anemic nun" (B, 10); essentially dead, "no one, save perhaps Tinka her ten-year-old, was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive" (B, 10).

Babbitt's children are similarly unsubstantial. His elder daughter Verona is a vacuous pseudo-intellectual "given to solitudes about duty and sex and God" (B, 16). His son Ted is a carbon-copy of his father in his preoccupation with money, material possessions and social trivia. Lewis emphasizes their similarity in numerous ways. Both wear the clothes of their respective peer-groups and decorate themselves with the status-symbols of their social castes. Babbitt Sr. completes the ritual of dressing with the insertion of the Boosters' Club button, which makes him "feel loyal and important. It associated him with Good Fellows, with men who were nice and human, and important in business circles" (B, 12). Similarly, Ted "wore a high-school button, a class button, and a fraternity pin" (B, 20). If anything, Ted is even a more debased product





of society than is his father, for he lacks utterly any idealism. We are told that "where Babbitt as a boy had aspired to the presidency, his son Ted aspired to a Packard twin-six and an established position in the motored gentry" (B, 63). Other than this, there is little real difference between the two. What potential Ted might have possessed has long ago been lost; that his own philistinism has been inherited from his father is obvious from their numerous conversations together. On one occasion, Ted asks his parents why he should study "'old-fashioned junk'" (B, 64) like literature "'that isn't any practical use'" (B, 68). Babbitt, although agreeing as to the stupidity of "'studying poetry and French and subjects that never brought in anybody a cent'" (B, 72), feels that such "irrelevancies" are needed if one is to enter college, which has value in money-making terms. Ted goes on to deny the value of college on the grounds that "'there's a lot of fellows that have graduated from college that don't begin to make as much money as fellows that went to work early'" (B, 65) and suggests an absurd correspondence school which in fact impresses Babbitt. Significantly, the conversation is based purely on materialistic premisses to which both father and son subscribe. Later, when the two travel to Chicago together, their similarity is even more obvious; their comments during the trip are indistinguishable, their behaviour identical.

The sterility of Babbitt's family led Geismar to conclude that Lewis had denied the very existence of spiritual values, and that in such a denial lay his most glaring artistic deficiency: "Just as there is practically no sense of human love in the whole range of Lewis's psychological values, and no sense of real hatred -- there is no genuine sense of human freedom."<sup>7</sup> Assuming that mankind "can hardly have lost all the



basic human instincts in a century of American industrialism and barely a half-century of the middle-class ethos,"<sup>8</sup> Geismar believed that Lewis had neglected a significant aspect of life in his fiction. This interpretation, though in many respects accurate, overlooks the possibility that the portrayal of almost universal sterility in Babbitt was an intentional attempt to provide us with a most revealing insight into the nature of the middle-class world as Lewis saw it; that this absence of true values is the essential message of the novel. The portrayal of society as having all but stifled the vital instincts does not indict Lewis, as Geismar suggests, but reveals rather an awareness on the novelist's part of an all-pervasive, spiritually destructive force at work in the community whose power to eliminate meaningful values from human consideration is virtually supreme. The very extent to which the typical citizen Babbitt has been spiritually destroyed by society substantiates the extent of its power in Lewis' opinion. One example of this is seen in society's effect on Babbitt's imagination. Annoyed continually by his innocuous wife and his endlessly bickering children, Babbitt dimly desires escape. However, any genuine sense of a truly meaningful alternative to his unsatisfying life has been denied him, society having stunted his imaginative powers to the point where the desire for a more fulfilling life of romance and adventure has been reduced to a vaguely erotic and mawkish fantasy concerning a "fairy child" with whom he dreams impossibly of escape. In short, society has so filled his mind with its false values that he has no personal beliefs on which to rely. His every opinion is derived from society's propaganda-makers, and Lewis remarks that



Just as he was an Elk, a Booster, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality. (B, 80-81)

Here Lewis is most explicit regarding the cynicism of society's leaders, for they are shown as deliberately concocting myths which the credulous Babbitts willingly accept. The author is more obviously aware than in previous novels of the calculating natures of the leaders; in this passage, for example, he assumes that definite programs of social indoctrination are initiated by select groups of leaders such as advertisers and politicians. In Babbitt a definite distinction is made between these leaders, who are themselves under no illusions regarding the sanctity of society's mores and the minions who, like Babbitt, credulously accept these social values as absolute maxims. Unquestioningly the minions accept the standards of behaviour imposed upon them by the leaders, and as later will be seen, even go so far as to police themselves, ridding the community of rebellious members; the leaders can rest assured in the knowledge that the system of enslavement is perpetuated by the slaves themselves.

All the values of the social system are based on a purely quantitative method of evaluating aspects of life. Quantity, or size, becomes the sole criterion whereby the value of an object or institution is determined. Thus, "Babbitt respected bigness in anything" (B, 29). His only value is one of size in a material sense, be it the population of a city or church congregation, the cost of a car, or the extent of a bank account. Those qualitative distinctions whereby man has traditionally distinguished genuine orders of value have been discarded by the leaders of society as irrelevant to the furthering of their own interests. Thus,





poetry is subordinated in value to advertising, literature to "business English"; a symphony orchestra has value, but only insofar as it will attract tourists and in turn stimulate business. Naturally, money is a most important aspect of this one-dimensional value system, in its ability to serve as a standard whereby "size" can be determined. Thus, Babbitt usually evaluates others in terms of their wealth, and is indifferent to other considerations. Two pillars of Babbitt's society, Charles McKelvey and William Eathorne, whom he will encounter later in the novel, he admires and respects solely because they are rich; their possible immorality does not concern him. Similarly, unrestricted business growth, as it enhances "size", is a supreme good whether it has resulted from legal or ethical practices or not; when a discharged employee threatens Babbitt with exposure for certain illegal real estate transactions, he rationalizes easily that "'I've never done anything that wasn't necessary to keep the Wheels of Progress moving'" (B, 195). Conversely, anything which threatens such growth, such as a workers' union demanding fair wages, is by definition evil.

As was mentioned in Main Street, Lewis believed that the values of America have indeed suffered a decline. Originally, status and wealth were thought of merely as bi-products of a life of diligence and work, which resulted from a man's often-idealistic commitment to a goal of some sort. In Babbitt's milieu these accompanying status symbols have replaced the original goals in significance; the bi-products have become all-important, their origins irrelevant. When Babbitt mentions to his family the possibility of acquiring a new car, he does so as a result of having received a commission for services rendered to a client which are ethically, at best, of a dubious nature. Also important is Babbitt's



indifference to the means whereby the commission was obtained; the enlargement of his bankroll is all that concerns him.

That Babbitt does not become evil in our eyes is simply because he is as obviously unaware of his philistinism as he is of his being manipulated by society's leaders. Too much the dupe ever to be consciously evil, he is at no point aware that he is in any way immoral or hypocritical; he has been rendered so spiritually blind that, regarding morality, he can only vaguely conceive "a thing called Ethics, whose nature was confusing but if you had it you were a High-class Realtor and if you hadn't you were a shyster, a piker, and a fly-by-night" (B, 38). Any true sense of morals having been replaced throughout society with a vulgar, opportunistic ethic which condones any form of business chicanery as long as one is not apprehended, Babbitt has never had the opportunity to see that what he is doing is wrong; in this sense he cannot really be blamed for his actions.

If society has made of Babbitt a minion, it has created in his friend Paul Riesling a lost and desperate rebel, similar in ways to Carol Kennicott, but one whose ambitions were at one point more definite. Originally having intended to study the violin, Paul has instead found himself trapped in an unhappy marriage and a mundane career. As he says, "'I ought to have been a fiddler, and I'm a pedler of tar-roofing'" (B, 52). Although he yearns for escape, his own weakness has prevented him from attaining a more fulfilling life, and he admits that he "'can't even talk about it /his wasted life/, except to you, because anybody else would think I was yellow. Maybe I am'" (B, 53), he confesses.

In many ways Paul is also similar to Guy Pollock of Main Street. Like Pollock, Paul's weakness is coupled with a basic acceptance of society



that is ultimately responsible for his entrapped state; he himself admits he enjoys the business life, "'of putting it over on the labor unions, and seeing a big check coming in, and the business increasing'" (B, 55).

Although bitter and disillusioned, he is far more accepting of his way of life than he cares to admit, and quickly recants when Babbitt suggests that his social criticisms boarder on the seditious and socialistic:

"'Oh yes, of course I don't really exactly mean that -- I s'pose. Course -- competition -- brings out the best -- survival of the fittest -- but --'" (B, 55). Ultimately bound to the system and unable to muster the strength needed to escape, Paul is tortured by the frustration that attends a life of unrealized aspirations.

Both Paul and Carol Kennicott are lost rebels, trapped unhappily in worlds they loathe. However, where Carol possessed no personal goal, Paul knows most definitely wherein a more satisfying life would lie, but weakness prevents him from escaping to attain it. Commenting on this weakness, Lewis remarks that in conversation "Paul was bold, but not quite sure about what he was being bold" (B, 56). When Babbitt asks him why he fails to act on the basis on his convictions, he can only reply "'Nobody does. Habit too strong'" (B, 56), a remark which recalls Pollock's use of the "village virus" to rationalize his inactivity. Consequently, as he is a weakling, Paul can only suggest a timid, temporary escape to Maine for a holiday, where they would "'loaf by ourselves and smoke and cuss and be natural'" (B, 56) and in fact give themselves the illusion of having attained freedom.

Although society appears to dominate Babbitt and his friends utterly, determining their every opinion, Lewis assumed that even within such men there existed a basic desire for freedom that, although repressed,





sought outlet. Paul's suggested trip to Maine is one such instance of freedom trying to be realized. Another manifestation of this longing for a more legitimate life occurs when Babbitt admits to Paul that he too is lonely and frustrated, confessing that although

"I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices 'specially, except smoking -- and I'm practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied!" (B, 52)

Pathetic indeed is his list of "accomplishments"; all have been determined for him by society. Furthermore, Lewis hints later in the book that in the past Babbitt did indeed possess genuine desires that were stifled.

As a youth, he was something of an idealist, and intended to be "'a lawyer, and take the cases of the poor for nothing, and fight the rich'" (B, 244). Having repressed this genuine aspiration, Babbitt's inner life has subsequently centred around a constant, though largely inarticulate, desire for escape. But having lost sight of his original goals, now when these thoughts of escape enter his mind they can only take substance in a socially-acceptable form, such as the trip to Maine.

His typical day completed,<sup>9</sup> Babbitt retires for the night, blissfully unaware of his actual position in life. However, Lewis has provided us with a perspective the better to evaluate this position, for he presents various conversations supposedly taking place elsewhere in Zenith while he sleeps. On the one hand we are privy to a discussion between two critics of the society to which Babbitt and his like are enslaved. Seneca Doane, the radical lawyer, represents a genuine alternative to the lifestyle of Babbitt, and advances both in his criticisms of Zenith and through his actions in the novel an approach to life that is held up by Lewis



for our respect. What appalls Doane is not standardization in itself, for as he says "'when I buy an Ingersoll watch or a Ford, I get a better tool for less money, and I know precisely what I'm getting, and that leaves me more time and energy to be an individual in'" (B, 85). Rather, the true enemy is "'standardization of thought'" (B, 85). Concluding that "'their standardized minds are the enemy'" (B, 85), Doane is generally correct, but he fails to indict as well those leaders of society who are ultimately responsible for the standardization he laments. Accordingly, Lewis shows us yet another conversation between two such social leaders who explicitly and cynically comment on the gullibility of their subordinates. Jake Offutt, the politician, remarks to his fellow-leader Henry Thompson, Babbitt's father-in-law:

"Wonder how long we can keep it up, Hank? We're safe as long as the good little boys like George Babbitt and all the nice respectable labor-leaders think you and me are rugged patriots. There's swell pickings for an honest politician here, Hank: a whole city working to provide cigars and fried chicken and dry martinis for us, and rallying to our banner with indignation, oh, fierce indignation, whenever some squealer like this fellow Seneca Doane comes along! Honest, Hank, a smart codger like me ought to be ashamed of himself if he didn't milk cattle like them, when they come around mooing for it!" (B, 85-86)

Offutt goes on to conclude with the wish that they could rid the city of men like Doane, whom he sees as both having the necessary individuality to resist indoctrination themselves and sufficient strength possibly to awaken the minions to the truth of their enslavement.

This passage is important in the development of Lewis' view regarding the leaders of society and their motivating impulses. Previously, leaders such as Stowbody, Bresnahan and even the Guilfogles and Pembertons of the world were seen believing in the moral necessity of their leadership; in a perverse way, they were sincere. Here there is no shred of sincerity left in Offutt or Thompson, only a cynical awareness that the



public can be used as a tool whereby to gain power, wealth and prestige. Lewis concludes the chapter with another reminder of Babbitt, lost in dreams of the fairy-child, thereby substantiating Offutt's cynical disregard for his intelligence. Utterly unaware that he is being used, Babbitt ironically believes himself to be socially superior to his father-in-law Henry Thompson. Patronizing the latter's "antiquated provincialism" (B, 59), "he knew himself to be of a breeding altogether more esthetic and sensitive than Thompson's" (B, 59); of course Thompson has vast power of which Babbitt is totally ignorant.

Critics have cited Offutt's cynical speech as evidence of Lewis' basic sympathy for Babbitt; Dooley, commenting that "the Babbitts are only pawns in the hands of the real villains, the racketeers like Colonel Snow, Jake Offutt, and Henry Thompson," concludes that "Lewis accepts the middle-class myth that the Babbitts are not to blame."<sup>10</sup> Yet, although Babbitt is no more to blame for his lot in life than he is for his business immorality, Lewis' contempt for his gullibility is unmistakable throughout the novel, the author agreeing with Offutt that the task of rendering the populace servile is facilitated by their willing acceptance of servility. Thus, while sympathizing with Babbitt's plight, Lewis cannot entirely absolve him of responsibility, for in a very real sense he is his own worst enemy.

The Babbitts' dinner party typifies the atmosphere of trivia and falseness to which he is constantly subjected. To his credit, he begins dimly to see his friends for the smug, fatuous and empty human beings they are; "Babbitt was not merely bored but admitting that he was bored" (B, 103). Again, he desires escape, and pictures himself "loafing with Paul Riesling beside a lake in Maine. It was as overpowering and imaginative as home-





sickness" (B, 104). After the guests leave, he timidly suggests to Myra that he and Paul might go away for a while by themselves. Naturally, the timid escape is doomed to failure for obvious reasons. First, both must virtually beg for their wives' permission to go to Maine, suggesting the degree to which they lack any true strength and independence. Secondly, the escape is purely negative, since neither man is capable of escaping to any alternative way of life. Society, from which they are ostensibly fleeing, surrounds them even on the train; they meet other men exactly like themselves, and the talk consists entirely of business conditions: "To them, the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but the great sales-manager. . .who devoted himself and all his young samurai to the cosmic purpose of Selling -- not selling anything in particular, for or to anybody in particular, but pure Selling" (B, 119). Even Paul, though he offends them at one point when he remarks on the beauty of the countryside, is an enthusiastic participant in much of their banality.

Lewis appears undecided as to the therapeutic value of the vacation in Maine. On the one hand, Paul becomes "clear-eyed and merry" (B, 126), and even Babbitt grows "cheerful, as though he had cleansed his veins of poisonous energy and was filling them with wholesome blood" (B, 126). On the other hand, though rejuvenated in this way, the escape also reveals to them how extensively dissatisfied they are; Paul and Babbitt become more honest with each other, and admit they have "'never done anything the way we thought we would'" (B, 125). Paul is made painfully aware of his own weakness as he gazes longingly at the ocean liners, and Babbitt uncovers "layer on layer of hidden weariness" (B, 126). The point is that, despite the beneficial effects which proceed from their immediate



separation from society's pressures, neither man is able to embrace as a result of this any compensatory way of life. Brought to the threshold of freedom, as it were, Babbitt only discovers again what he saw when first deciding to make the trip, that he is at a loss as to "what he could do with anything so unknown and so embarrassing as freedom" (B, 109). The vacation, then, has brought them closer to truth, but this truth consists mainly of a realization of their own wasted lives. As a result, upon returning to Zenith Babbitt becomes once again a part of the meaningless world of "hustle", of "men who had made five thousand, year before last, and ten thousand last year, /who/ were urging on nerve-yelping bodies and parched brains so that they might make twenty thousand this year" (B, 128).

When an election occurs in Zenith, Seneca Doane runs for mayor; the establishment nominates one Lucas Prout, a man "with a perfect record for sanity" (B, 145), on whose behalf Babbitt is asked to speak. However, though he is influencing others to vote conventionally, Babbitt himself is also seen as a victim, for there is no cynicism behind his attempt to sway the masses; rather, he obviously believes in the rightness of his cause: "He had faith; he was certain that if Lincoln were alive, he would be electioneering for Mr. W. G. Harding -- unless he came to Zenith and electioneered for Lucas Prout" (B, 146). As a tool of the leaders, he has merely been commissioned, as it were, to influence the public accordingly. It is significant that little influence is really needed, for among his various audiences the only rebellious element is that which has not been "Americanized", "young cynical workmen, for the most part foreigners" (B, 147). The older, indoctrinated citizens accept Babbitt's speech enthusiastically: "the older men, the patient, stooped carpenters and mechanics, cheered him; and when he worked up to his anecdote of Lincoln their eyes were



wet" (B, 147). For Babbitt's services he receives "advance information about the extension of paved highways. . . /which/ a grateful administration gave to him" (B, 148).

Babbitt's fame as an "orator" grows as a result of his election speeches, and soon after he is asked to deliver an address to the real-estate board. Here he delineates the qualities desired of the average man as far as society's leaders are concerned. Nothing short of total standardization of behaviour to a principle of philistinism is expected; the ideal mass man is to value nothing of a non-materialistic nature. Thus, art can be appreciated only in terms of its fiscal value; literature can be considered worthy only insofar as it upholds the meaningless social values of the day. The ideal of behaviour which Babbitt advocates, and that which the unseen leaders desire the masses to accept as a datum, is that of the "Standardized American Citizen" (B, 151), credulous and gullible, working for the benefit of those above him and willingly sacrificing his uniqueness as an individual and his ability to think for himself. Babbitt praises this ideal citizen, evaluating him solely in terms of how much he can contribute to the production of wealth and materialistic growth.

Noticeably, Babbitt's status does not rise in the community despite the services he has performed; too much a believer in the very nonsense of his speeches to be leadership material himself, Babbitt is rejected as a possible equal since he embodies the very standardization of which he speaks. Unaware of this, however, he aspires beyond his station. At a class reunion he tries to ingratiate himself with Charles McKelvey, one such social aristocrat, whose history has been one of leadership even from his college days. "He was baronial; he was a peer in the rapidly crystallizing American aristocracy, inferior only to the





haughty Old Families" (B, 158). Unscrupulous and unprincipled in his business dealings, Lewis informs us that "he was, particularly when he was influencing legislatures or hiring labor-spies, very easy and lovable and gorgeous" (B, 158). More importantly, it is this lack of scruples which accounts for his successful leadership of others. As in Main Street, where Bresnahan was seen replacing Stowbody in influence among the community, McKelvey's leadership is supplanting that of the elder "aristocrats"; similarly, the new leadership is more to be feared, for McKelvey's "power was the greater because he was not hindered by scruples, by either the vice or the virtue of the older Puritan tradition" (B, 158). The difference between McKelvey and Babbitt is obvious, and it is no wonder that Babbitt's attempts to rise to a position of equality fail.

Just as politics, ethics and art have been debased in Babbitt's world, so religion has adapted itself to the values of society. Primarily, the church exists merely to encourage respectability and conformity among the citizens; thus, "the kernel of his /Babbitt's/ practical religion was that it was respectable, and beneficial to one's business, to be seen going to services" (B, 170). Babbitt is ironically correct in his assumption that part of religion's "value" lies in its ability to keep "the Worst elements from being still worse" (B, 170); as Carol Kennicott saw the church as a strong force commanding conformity,<sup>11</sup> so here the church services are also little more than indoctrination classes. The minister of Babbitt's church, Rev. Drew, "was eloquent, efficient, and versatile. He presided at meetings for the denunciation of unions or the elevation of domestic service, and confided to the audiences that as a poor boy he had carried newspapers" (B, 167). Nor is Drew's influence limited to the confines of the church; in the paper he "wrote editorials on 'The Manly Man's



Religion' and 'The Dollars and Sense Value of Christianity'. . . .He often said that he was 'proud to be known as primarily a business man'" (B, 167). Notably, any sense of the spiritual is absent in Drew. He too subscribes to the one value of quantity, and it is no surprise when he asks Babbitt to produce a scheme for enlarging the size of the Sunday-school.

Babbitt's plan for Sunday-school expansion is laughably apropos; he proposes to elicit membership through the likening of the Sunday-school to an army, whereby rank among the children is determined by how many members each can amass. Significantly, another of society's leaders appears behind the proposed scheme, in a supervisory capacity. The banker William Eathorne, if anything, merits even more awe from the minion Babbitt than did McKelvey: "If Babbitt was envious of the Smart Set of the McKelveys, before William Washington Eathorne he was reverent. Mr. Eathorne had nothing to do with the Smart Set. He was above it" (B, 169). Like McKelvey, he is powerful, and "could examine credits, make loans, promote or injure a man's business" (B, 169). His mansion "embodies the heavy dignity of those Victorian financiers who ruled the generation between the pioneers and the brisk 'sales-engineers' and created a somber oligarchy by gaining control of banks, mills, land, railroads, mines" (B, 174). Remote from the lives of the typical citizens, who are only dimly aware of his presence, he is very much a part of that hierarchy of social leaders: "Out of the dozen contradictory Zeniths who together make up the true and complete Zenith, none is so powerful and enduring yet none so unfamiliar to the citizens as the small, still, dry, polite, cruel Zenith of the William Eathornes; and for that tiny hierarchy the other Zeniths unwittingly labor and insignificantly die" (B, 174). Yet



Eathorne needs men like Babbitt who are in touch with and part of the community, to envisage and put into effect those programs which perpetuate and encourage standardized behaviour. Too dignified himself to soil his hands in actual contact with the masses, Eathorne condones Babbitt's foolish, vulgar plan for Sunday-school expansion. The scheme clearly pleases him, because it accomplishes two goals, preying as it does on the same fear among children of social ostracism that keeps Babbitt and his like respectable conformists, and conveniently obscuring whatever spirituality might have been found in true religion. It represents indoctrination of a most insidious sort, because it impresses on potentially individualistic yet impressionable children the supreme value of conformity and regimented behaviour. By forcing children to attend on penalty of ostracism from friends and playmates, the youngster is in effect told that to conform to the wishes of a group and to sacrifice in the process whatever personal identity he may have, is the most desirable social goal one can possess. Significantly, the plan succeeds, and Babbitt is again rewarded through a secret loan for an illegal transaction, given him by Eathorne's bank.

Despite Babbitt's successes in the community, several events occur which combine to shake him from his complacency. The desperate Paul shoots his wife Zilla in an abortive attempt to free himself, forcing Babbitt for the first time to take stock of this world which can produce such unhappiness and misery. Now deprived of friendship, Babbitt realizes "that he faced a world which, without Paul, was meaningless" (B, 218). When visiting Paul in prison, "Babbitt knew that in this place of death Paul was already dead. And as he pondered on the train home something in his own self seemed to have died: a loyal and vigorous faith in the





goodness of the world, a fear of public disfavor, a pride in success"

(B, 226). Losing Paul is most important in terms of Babbitt's development for it brings him to the realization that his past achievements, his material security, his social position -- in short, all those societal values on which he has based his life -- are meaningless in that they in no way compensate for the loss of his friend:

It was coming to him that perhaps all life as he knew it and vigorously practised it was futile; that heaven as portrayed by the Reverend Dr. John Jennison Drew was neither probable nor very interesting; that he hadn't much pleasure out of making money; that it was of doubtful worth to rear children merely that they might rear children who would rear children. (B, 221)

Yet beyond this state of disillusionment Babbitt cannot progress. Having previously embraced the beliefs and conventions of society to the exclusion of any meaningful values, he now finds he has nothing tangible to fall back on; as such, his desire for escape to a more meaningful life, though legitimate in itself, cannot succeed, because Babbitt's world has denied him any awareness of those qualities of life whereby true fulfillment would be possible. Thus, although he comes to see that his wealth and social position are at best only of incidental value, that his friendship for Paul was of infinitely greater importance, he is unable to move meaningfully beyond this realization. As Lewis remarks, Babbitt "did know that he wanted the presence of Paul Riesling; and from that he stumbled into the admission that he wanted the fairy girl -- in the flesh" (B, 221). In short, Babbitt's genuine desire for love can only express itself in a crude, sexual way, which is bound to be unsatisfying. After attempting a series of timid, unsuccessful sexual affairs, Babbitt decides to escape once again to Maine, hoping vainly to find something in the wilderness which will compensate for his futile existence. Like the misguided Carol



Kennicott, however, Babbitt also seeks a solution from without, rather than from within. Romanticizing the Maine environment much as Carol did Washington, he sees it as a bastion of freedom:

All the way north he pictured the Maine guides: simple and strong and daring, jolly as they played stud-poker in their unceiled shack, wise in woodcraft as they tramped the forest and shot the rapids. He particularly remembered Joe Paradise, half Yankee, half Indian. If he could but take up a backwoods claim with a man like Joe, work hard with his hands, be free and noisy in a flannel shirt, and never come back to this dull decency! (B, 238)

However, in Maine Babbitt is isolated and lonely. "Neither in his voiceless cabin, fragrant with planks of new-cut pine, nor along the lake, nor in the sunset clouds which presently eddied behind the lavender-misted mountains, could Babbitt find the spirit of Paul as a reassuring presence" (B, 239). Hoping to find in the local guide Joe Paradise an embodiment of the meaningful existence he is desperately seeking, Babbitt is appalled to learn that the woodsman adheres to the same false values he is attempting to escape from; asking Joe what his aspirations are, he receives the reply that "'If I had the money, I'd go down to Tinker's Falls and open a swell shoe store'" (B, 241). At this point Babbitt sees clearly for the first time the extent of his enslavement, the degree to which his mind has been glutted with societal concerns: "Thus it came to him merely to run away was folly, because he could never run away from himself" (B, 242). In a way, this is Babbitt's moment of truth, for he realizes that in no way, bound as he has been to society, would he ever be able to effect a successful escape. So he returns to Zenith, "not because it was what he longed to do but because it was all he could do. He scanned again his discovery that he could never run away from Zenith and family and office, because in his own brain he bore the office and the



family and every street and disquiet and illusion of Zenith" (B, 242).

On the train home Babbitt meets Seneca Doane, and in spite of himself feels respect for this true individual. Unlike Babbitt, Doane possesses genuine personal values; his attempt to run for mayor and his participation in a number of concrete reforms clearly label him as a man of dedication and principle; "Doane warmed up and became reminiscent. He spoke of student days in Germany, of lobbying for a single tax in Washington, of international labor conferences" (B, 245). His past has been a series of commitments to definite goals, goals to which Babbitt, as a social minion, could never subscribe.

As a result of his trip to Maine, Babbitt subsequently becomes something of a rebel, expressing sympathy with the cause of labor, criticizing the church and even indulging in a love-affair. However, Babbitt's rebellion is abortive from the start, being nothing more than a desperate attempt to assert independence by defying (rather than, for example, transcending) conventions and beliefs to which he knows he is bound. It is not truly sincere, since it does not proceed from any genuine conviction on his part. Accordingly, Lewis casts numerous aspersions on the legitimacy of Babbitt's rebellion. When a general strike occurs in Zenith, Lewis remarks that "Babbitt chose this time to be publicly liberal" (B, 250, my italics), implying a lack of true conviction on his part. In fact, his instinctive sympathies are still on the side of the status quo, and Lewis adds that he actually "hated the scoundrels who were deliberately obstructing the pleasant ways of prosperity" (B, 252). If he feels anything for the strikers, it is only envy for their possession of a courage which he lacks; at any rate, for whatever reason he timidly defends them in the presence of his friends. Significantly, Vergil Gunch, a "police-





man" of conformity much like Mrs. Bogart in Main Street and a supposed friend of Babbitt, "intimidatingly said nothing. He put on sternness like a mask; his jaw was hard, his brisly short hair seemed cruel, his silence was a ferocious thunder. . . .Like a robed judge, he listened to Babbitt's stammering. . . .Gunch said nothing, and watched; and Babbitt knew that he was being watched" (B, 254). Any deviation, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is observed and dealt with strictly. Babbitt even hesitates to visit Doane, for fear of his being observed by the "police-man" Gunch.

In the lonely and willing widow Tanis Judique Babbitt believes he has found an answer to his despair. Appearing sophisticated and cultured, Tanis and her friends represent to the convention-bound Babbitt apparent freedom from the social restrictions to which he has been bound throughout his life. Turning to her for escape from his milieu, he fails to see that she too, in her apartment, lives in "a world of good little people, comfortable, industrious, credulous" (B, 258). Though Tanis appears attractive to him, she does so only in comparison with the utterly drab and lifeless Myra; in fact, she is an equally conventional woman. Fooling himself that Tanis is "'the brainiest and the loveliest and finest woman I've ever met'" (B, 264), he overlooks the fact that she is "as 'bossy' as his wife and far more whining when he was inattentive" (B, 266).

Tanis' friends are similarly unsubstantial; Babbitt becomes part of her circle, a group who pretentiously call themselves "the Bunch". Far from being the band of free-thinking bohemians they believe themselves to be, the Bunch is merely an extension of the society Babbitt is attempting to escape from, demanding as rigid a conformity to their own



standards as does society in general. As would be expected, a similar desire to belong characterizes Babbitt's activities with them as it did before when he was a "respectable" citizen. As Lewis remarks, he is basically unchanged: "To be the 'livest' of them was as much his ambition now as it had been to excel at making money, at playing golf, at motor-driving, at oratory, at climbing to the McKelvey set" (B, 274). Having no inner identity, he is at the mercy of any social group; thus when Gunch informs him, in the midst of his supposed rebellion, of the proposed Good Citizens' League, Babbitt "felt a compulsion back to all the standards he had so vaguely yet so desperately been fleeing" (B, 277).

As he grows used to Tanis, Babbitt himself realizes that she is in her wheedling, abject way just as domineering as Myra. In her presence, he grows increasingly dissatisfied; "he wanted to flee out to a hard, sure, unemotional man-world" (B, 293). Though he finally summons enough strength to break away from Tanis, Babbitt's "independence" is short-lived, for soon after he is confronted by a delegation from the fascistic Good Citizens' League. The trio of "large, resolute, big-jawed men, . . . all high lords in the land of Zenith" (B, 296) make no pretence of badgering Babbitt to conform to society's standards; "in their whelming presence Babbitt felt small and insignificant" (B, 296). Now all pretence is dropped; as one of them says, "'We've decided we want you to join'" (B, 296). Threatening Babbitt with economic ruin if he should resist, they add "We're not begging you to join the G.C.L. -- we're permitting you to join'" (B, 297) on penalty of social ostracism and economic ruin. Resenting their bullying, Babbitt does resist, and the threat is carried out with cruel swiftness. His former friends refuse to acknowledge him



on the street; his secretary leaves him for a rival firm; he is left out of a lucrative real estate deal. The reality of society's power impressed thus upon him, Babbitt soon admits "that he would like to flee back to the security of conformity, provided there was a decent and creditable way to return" (B, 301). Now alienated by the very world that has been everything to him, he is left with nothing: "The independence seeped out of him and he walked the streets alone, afraid of men's cynical eyes and the incessant hiss of whispering" (B 303).

Myra's attack of appendicitis forces Babbitt to face directly the awful prospect of life apart from the security that identification with others brings. Just as he is forced through the thought of losing Myra to recognize the extent to which he was dependent on her for security, so he is made to see that he cannot bear the thought of isolation from society in general. Lewis explains:

It may be that his frightened repentance of the night and morning had not eaten in, but the dehumanizing internment of her who had been so pathetically human shook him utterly, and as he crouched again on the high stool in the laboratory he swore faith to his wife. . .to Zenith. . .to business efficiency. . .to the Boosters' Club. . .to every faith of the Clan of Good Fellows. (B, 309)

For their part, the G.C.L. merely takes advantage of the situation to use a more subtle method of coercion, appearing to coax him to join.

This coaxing is all Babbitt needs, and lamentably is not intelligent enough to see that they have duped him.

Thus he joins the G.C.L. and becomes a willing member of a social institution designed to suppress any and all individuality, actively seeking to enforce total conformity among its citizens. Its members believe "that American democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals,





and vocabulary" (B, 311). "Americanization" classes are held in an attempt to indoctrinate new citizens, "so that newly arrived foreigners might learn that the true-blue and one hundred per cent American way of settling labor-troubles was for workmen to trust and love their employers" (B, 313). Similarly, other associations which further this goal, such as the conservative Y.M.C.A., are aided by the League, despite the leaders' actual contempt for that organization's values. Any instances of nonconformity are ruthlessly dealt with; a conscientious objector is run out of town, the socialist headquarters burned and destroyed.

Having re-accepted society in all its aspects, Babbitt turns to Rev. Drew for counsel regarding his past "immorality". This visit may be an attempt on Babbitt's part to rationalize that his society possesses genuine spiritual values. However, when he sees Drew looking at his watch while ostensibly in the act of praying for Babbitt's soul, he is unable to deceive himself any longer in this regard, and must admit that, although returned to prosperity and popularity, "he had been trapped into the very net from which he had with such fury escaped and, supremest jest of all, been made to rejoice in the trapping" (B, 316); in short, he is defeated. The only satisfaction he can take is from his son Ted's impulsive marriage, and tells him "'I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it'" (B, 319). Of course, such satisfaction is not really justified. Having no concept of meaningfully directed nonconformity, Babbitt pathetically has come to believe that any unconventional behaviour is of value. Surely we are meant to see the novel's conclusion as ironic, in light of what we know of Ted's personality.



Society's triumph in Babbitt's case appears to be total, having rendered this typical citizen unable to defy his milieu in any real way because he lacked the spiritual tools whereby such defiance might be achieved. Paul, the lost rebel is "dead"; nor is there any real hope for the motor-mad, foolish Ted and his flashy, star-struck bride. What little optimism exists centres around Seneca Doane, but even his integrity, it would appear, is insufficient to combat successfully the awesome power of society.



#### IV

##### ARROWSMITH: THE TRUE INDIVIDUAL

When Arrowsmith appeared in 1925, it initially placated those critics who, as Schorer says, had suggested "that Sinclair Lewis was without 'spiritual gifts'."<sup>1</sup> Many reviewers agreed with Stuart Sherman that the author had at last discovered a hero legitimately worthy of respect and admiration.<sup>2</sup> Whipple believed that the book contained "all Main Street and all Babbitt, and much more besides."<sup>3</sup> The extra quality of Arrowsmith, Whipple believed, lay in its established point of view: "Moreover, having a more sharply defined point of view, it is more positive, and it goes deeper, concerning itself less with the surface and more with a fundamental trait of the national character"<sup>4</sup> in its examination of the hero's search for freedom. In short, to Lewis' contemporary critics the novel was considered superior because here the author had at last portrayed through Martin Arrowsmith's idealistic dedication to scientific research a credible manifestation of human integrity.

Ironically, later critics saw the idealism of Arrowsmith in terms of its "unique" relationship to the rest of Lewis' fiction, and concluded that the novel's very singularity suggested an insufficiency to its message. In 1935 Granville Hicks pointed to the hero's final position in the novel as evidence that the work could not be taken as a general alternative to the spiritually empty worlds of Main Street and Babbitt. "When Lewis says that integrity involves sacrifice and is worth it, he is saying something that is relevant to any kind of life, but the concrete





problems of application remain unsolved. No large number of persons can lead the good life in laboratories in the woods."<sup>5</sup> As such, Hicks believed the novel could not be generally applied as a solution to the basic plight of individual man in conflict with his surroundings. From this, he concluded that in Arrowsmith "Lewis had not advanced quite so far in his search for the good life as might at first be thought."<sup>6</sup> But Hicks mistakenly placed too much literal importance on the particular nature of Martin Arrowsmith's ultimate situation, and overlooked that Lewis' emphasis is on his hero's ability to act independently; the particular form which that independence assumes is incidental. At the same time, while Arrowsmith's retreat to the woods is not meant by Lewis to be taken as representing the only course open to the man of integrity, Hicks is correct in seeing that in Arrowsmith a decided emphasis is placed on the need to escape in some sense from one's surroundings if such integrity is to be maintained. Like Miles Bjornstam and Carl Ericson before him, Martin realizes that in a world antagonistic to an individual's goals and aspirations, physical removal from that world is often, while not always, the only possible solution if that goal is to be realized. Naturally, there are exceptions; Gustaf Sondelius, like Seneca Doane of Babbitt, shows us that man can move within society and yet be apart from its enervating influence. However, Lewis is somewhat more doubtful in Arrowsmith than in previous novels as to an individual's ability to maintain integrity under these conditions. Of one thing the author is sure: the individual, whether circumstances force him to escape physically from society or not, is virtually by definition a lonely and isolated man, alienated and spiritually apart from a world that neither respects nor understands him.



As has been mentioned, Arrowsmith is similar to Trail of the Hawk in plot and structure, Lewis tracing in both cases the careers of his central figures from childhood, through a gradual process of maturation to a final successful conclusion. An individual even in his childhood, Martin has inherited a tradition of strength and independence from his forefathers. His great-grandmother resisted the temptation to partake of civilization's comforts and chose instead the independent life of the pioneer; Martin's ultimate renunciation of society stems from a similar desire for freedom. As a youth, he is influenced by the isolated renegade Doc Vickerson, himself an individual, who urges Martin to set a high goal for himself. However, Martin soon learns that the world in general does not offer similar encouragement to the development of his ambitions. As a university student preparing for medical school, he is confronted with the first of many social institutions which threaten to sap his individuality and cloud his sense of purpose. The state university which he attends serves the community as "a mill to turn out men and women who will lead moral lives, play bridge, drive good cars, be enterprising in business, and occasionally mention books, though they are not expected to have time to read them. It is a Ford Motor Factory, and if its products rattle a little, they are beautifully standardized, with perfectly interchangeable parts" (A, 10). The effect of this standardization process Martin observes in medical school; nowhere does he see in his fellow-students true sincerity or demonstrable individuality. Angus Duer, the most intelligent student in the class, is merely in medicine for the monetary rewards and social status that accompany the life of a physician. Irving Watters, "smilingly, easily, dependably dull" (A, 20), accepts



unthinkingly the ways of the world. Clif Clawson, the class "joker", lacks ideals of any sort, and those of the soul-saving Christian Ira Hinkley repel Martin utterly. Even the appealing Fatty Pfaff's stupidity and gullibility prevent him from receiving respect. Nor do his professors emerge as individuals. Rather than stimulate original thought, they merely give him dry, empty facts which he is expected to learn by rote. Whenever Martin challenges their "cookbook" wisdom, he is upbraided for his rebellious attitude.

Such pressures to conform Martin must resist, and initially does so with relative ease. Though "the University had become his world" (A, 11) it does so in the proper sense, as a means of enriching his knowledge; "the purpose of life was chemistry and physics and the prospect of biology next year" (A, 11). In addition, sensing that his freedom and individuality are in jeopardy, he resigns from the medical fraternity: "But Martin was alienated from the civilized, industrious, nice young men of Digamma Pi, in whose faces he could already see prescriptions, glossy white sterilizers, smart enclosed motors, and glass office-signs in the best gilt lettering. He preferred a barbarian loneliness, for next year he would be working with Max Gottlieb, and he could not be bothered" (A, 33). It will be noticed that Martin's "escape" from the fraternity, and for that matter all his subsequent escapes, are attempts to move from his immediate surroundings to a hopefully more meaningful environment. Unlike Carol Kennicott or Babbitt, Martin's movements are invariably accompanied by a definite goal in mind. Whereas Carol had no real purpose in her escape to Washington, and Babbitt's departure for Maine was vague and ill-defined, Martin clearly knows why he must remove himself from the encroaching influence of society in all its varied forms; in this case,





the goal of working with Gottlieb and therein actualizing a definite ambition, necessitates his voluntary departure from surroundings antagonistic to the fulfillment of such a goal.

Martin's desire to work with Max Gottlieb stems from his awareness that Gottlieb, alone in the university, is a true individual. Like Bone Stillman or Bjornstam, Gottlieb is a mystery to others, and "a thousand fables fluttered about him" (A, 12). When Martin first sees him, we are informed that Gottlieb is "unconscious of the world. He looked at Martin and through him; he moved away, muttering to himself, his shoulders stooped, his long hands clasped behind him. He was lost in the shadows, himself a shadow"(A, 13), existing on a plane above and beyond the concerns of the everyday world. Since his values are other than those held by society, the true individual usually conducts himself in a manner alien to the general public's understanding. Thus, Gottlieb moves through life the object of society's misunderstanding and contempt. Even his students, as they are products of this society, cannot understand him. Though appreciating the skill of his laboratory technique, they "gave him something of the respect they had for a man who could do card tricks or remove an appendix in seven minutes" (A, 35). The materialistic Angus Duer is contemptuous of Gottlieb's inability, despite this technical skill, to make more money; the sentimental students are appalled by his apparent indifference to the suffering of the guinea pigs used in his experiments. Martin alone sympathizes with Gottlieb, seeing that his passionate dedication to research is worthy of great respect; as he tells his friends, Gottlieb's "'just being in a lab is a prayer'"(A, 31). Throughout the novel, Gottlieb is pictured as a man alone; alienated from his family and possessing few personal friends, his only solace



lies in the lonely work of his laboratory, his only compatriots other scientists and philosophers. Himself he sees as a "German Jew who loves Father Nietzsche and Father Schopenhauer . . . and Father Koch and Father Pasteur and Brother Jacques Loeb and Brother Arrhenius" (A, 40-41).

Gottlieb is one of Lewis' comparatively complex characterizations; thus the evidence regarding him at first appears conflicting. Leora, for example, believes him to be "'a great man'" (A, 118) whose dedication to truth has isolated him from companionship and happiness. Lewis obviously admires this aspect of Gottlieb, and describes with evident sympathy his lonely life. As a youth in Germany absorbed in research, "all the while he was lonely" (A, 120), his devotion to science an object of ridicule in that practically-oriented society. In America, his relation to society remains unchanged, and he is "melancholy again in a lack of understanding friends" (A, 121). Nor is he immune to the barbs of a cruel and petty world; when the war breaks out, he is ostracized because of his German background even by his fellow-scientists, "and his deep-set wrinkle-lidded eyes looked ever on sadness" (A, 292). Gottlieb serves in the novel as Martin's principal mentor, existing in this capacity as a standard of scientific idealism and uncompromising integrity. Throughout Martin's career Gottlieb encourages and stimulates his devotion to the ideal of scientific truth, and serves indirectly as a type of conscience on those occasions when Martin would sacrifice such truth in the interests of expediency. Most importantly, he impresses Martin with the value of truth at the expense of all other considerations; truth alone is the scientist's "god", the ultimate principle for which to strive.

Yet Gottlieb, though a "lover of God" as his name implies, is no god himself, and Lewis even suggests that his singular devotion to



research is far from unequivocally desirable. It has made of him a snobbish elitist, a conservative who "doubted all progress of the intellect and the emotions" (A, 122) in man. He is also something of a misanthrope, contemptuous of the rest of mankind and indifferent to his wife and children. As he is immune to society's false values, so also does he often appear untouched by feelings for humanity of any kind. When his wife takes ill, he is neither able, due to his ignorance of practical medicine (for which he has expressed unmitigated contempt) to help her, nor does he appear to be moved by her suffering. "Whether or not he loved her, whether he was capable of ordinary domestic affection, could not be discovered" (A, 128).

This inhuman aspect of the individualist Gottlieb, which Lewis will later investigate in connection with Martin himself, introduces a new and hitherto unexamined characteristic of the man of integrity; here the portrayal of the true individual as a pure ideal is qualified by his apparent indifference to genuine human sympathy and feeling. At one point Lewis remarks that "there may have been in the shadowy heart of Max Gottlieb a diabolic insensibility to divine pity, to suffering humankind. . . . Certainly he who had lived to study the methods of immunizing mankind against disease had little interest in actually using those methods" (A, 332). In short, it would appear that the very ability to isolate oneself from social pressures in the interests of one's ambitions and goals tends also in the process to render one indifferent to all humane considerations. Previously, Lewis' individuals had been viewed simplistically, in a completely favorable light; here, however, a mature Lewis cannot evade the fact that on a personal level such figures are often far from sympathetic or even likable persons.





Nor is Lewis oblivious to the fact that the intensely idealistic individual can be extremely foolish as well. As such an idealist, Gottlieb is also profoundly impractical, on one occasion conceiving of an "altogether scientific" medical school which would dispense entirely with the task of producing general practitioners. Lewis comments that "so simple, or so insane, was he that he wrote to Dean Silva politely bidding him step down and hand over his school" (A, 124) for these purposes. Naturally, the plan is rejected and Gottlieb dismissed from the university. Much later, when the directorship of the McGurk Institute is vacant, Gottlieb is offered the position and accepts. However, utterly lacking in the qualities necessary for leadership, "in a month that Institute became a shambles" (A, 319). Gottlieb himself is mentally destroyed by the pressures of the directorship, and sinks into the oblivion of senility.

It is significant that Gottlieb should fail as a "leader" of others. Previously, Lewis had implied that all such leaders of society were motivated by a lust for power, prestige and glory; Gottlieb, as a true individual, possesses no such desires. Hence, his failure as a leader is almost predictable, and in a way speaks well for him, as it stems from his indifference to the social values of power, ambition and status which attend such prestigious positions in society. However, in Arrowsmith Lewis introduces a new aspect to the situation, and reminds us of the ironic fact that such leaders are often necessary if any form of social organization is to exist: "Among these jests Martin had never beheld one so pungent as this whereby the pretentiousness and fussy unimaginativeness which he had detested in Tubbs [the former Director] should have made him a good manager, while the genius of Gottlieb should have made him a feeble tyrant" (A, 321). This indicates that Lewis' view of society has



become more sophisticated, for the author can now admit that "the one thing worse than a too managed and standardized institution should be one that was not managed and standardized at all" (A, 321).

Just as evidence regarding Gottlieb is conflicting, Lewis presenting him both as a genius and a fool, a man of deep convictions and principles yet also somewhat inhuman and insensitive, so also is the author ambiguous regarding his final state in the novel. Following his breakdown, he becomes senile; "his arrogant eyes were clouded with ungovernable slow tears. . . .Gottlieb had sunk into his darkness" (A, 387). At the novel's close, however, Lewis implies that a spark of the old scientist's strength and vision still remains; "that evening, Max Gottlieb sat unmoving and alone, in a dark small room above the banging city street. Only his eyes were alive" (A, 430). In one sense Gottlieb has certainly been destroyed by his unfortunate though well-intended involvement with the everyday world. Yet he remains "alive", a success in the ultimate sense, as he retained his integrity throughout his life. His final state is not unlike that of Miles Bjornstam, in that both men, though ruined in one way, still command our respect as individuals. Despite the envelopment of society about him, he is still "above" the city street; that his eyes are alive indicates that his values could not be compromised.

Like Carl Ericson before him, Martin Arrowsmith is also affected by conventional women who seek to reduce him to a life of respectability. His first love, Madeline Fox, represents such an enervating influence; much as Gertie Cowles was initially attractive to Carl, so the impressionable Martin succumbs initially to Madeline's superficial appeal. Contemptuous of Martin's ideals, she advises him to discard his research



for a life of "'social position and power'" (A, 28) as a general practitioner. In spite of this, Martin is attracted to her, and rationalizes that she is capable through his tutelage of eventually appreciating and sympathizing with his commitment to research: "under his training she would learn the distinction between vague 'ideals' and the hard sureness of science" (A, 28). Of course, she possesses no such capability.

Madeline soon begins a program to channel Martin into a life of respectability, Lewis remarking somewhat bitterly that "few women can for long periods keep from trying to Improve their men, and To Improve means to change a person from what he is, whatever that may be, into something else" (A, 47). Lewis need hardly add that the finished product, though eminently "respectable," will be tame and emasculate as well. In a weak moment Martin proposes to Madeline; now sure of her power over him, she begins her campaign to dominate him in earnest, and "he was bewildered when she began improving him more airily than ever" (A, 50). She criticizes his irreverent friend Clif, his choice of a summer job, his colloquial mannerisms and what she considers to be his general vulgarity. Captivated by her sexual appeal, Martin begins to lose sight of his goal of research, and "was only a little excited . . . that Max Gottlieb should have appointed him undergraduate assistant for the coming year" (A, 51).

Lewis had little sympathy for the female who uses her sexuality as a tool whereby to entrap and debase men; as Grebstein points out, this type of woman appears with some frequency in his work. Istra Nash was the first such woman, representing Lewis' "rejection of the beautiful, clever, alluring, intellectual, yet emotionally shallow and destructive woman, a species culminating in Fran Dodsworth."<sup>7</sup> Certainly Madeline must be included among this list of females, all of whom are presented





with considerable satiric skill. But not all of Lewis' women are spiritually destructive influences, as Leora Tozer illustrates. Martin meets her when on an errand for Gottlieb, and immediately feels "an instant and complete comradeship with her, a relation free from the fencing and posing of his struggle with Madeline" (A, 56). In Leora he finds "a casualness, a lack of prejudice, a directness. . . .She was feminine but undemanding; she was never Improving and rarely shocked; she was neither flirtatious nor cold" (A, 58). With such appealing attributes, it is little wonder that Martin speedily (if somewhat cruelly) discards the pretentious Madeline for Leora, and marries her.

Leora is certainly intended by Lewis to represent an ideal woman, but she becomes as a result a somewhat unrealistic one, for in presenting her as virtually flawless Lewis runs the risk of taxing our credulity. In short, Leora's magnanimity and understanding are at times unconvincing; she is simply too good to be true. Examples of her unqualified devotion to Martin abound throughout the book. When the empty-headed but pretty Orchid Pickerbaugh leaves for Washington, thus terminating her rather childish affair with Martin, Leora remarks with evident sincerity and lack of jealousy "'I know how you feel about losing your Orchid. It's sort of youth going. She really is a peach'" (A, 244). When engaged in his research, Martin is totally oblivious to her needs and desires, but from Leora there is not the slightest complaint: rather, "she sat quiet. . . or she napped inoffensively, in the long living-room of their flat, while he worked over his dreary digit-infested books" (A, 287); on one occasion she even claims incredibly that, although "'I haven't any life outside of you. . . I've been glad to let you absorb me'" (A, 336). Seeing that he is actually "'a rotten husband'", she confesses devotedly



that "'I don't care. I'd rather have you than any decent husband'"  
(A, 337).

It is as a result difficult to believe that theirs is a relationship based on mutually deep and meaningful love. For it soon becomes evident that what Martin finds principally attractive in Leora is merely her desire to live solely for him, subordinating her own desires to his completely in the process. As Lewis tells us, "possibly the thing he most liked in Leora was her singular ability to be cheerfully non-existent even when she was present" (A, 324).

Though Leora may be unconvincing as a character, to the extent that she is too idealized ever to be accepted as a realistic figure, it is plain that Lewis has purposely portrayed her in as favourable a light as possible, in the interests of revealing an aspect of his dedicated individualist unexamined in previous novels. For in spite of her virtues, Martin treats her contemptibly throughout the book, neither trusting nor respecting her, if his actions are any indication. Jealous whenever other men show her attention, he has few if any scruples regarding his own conduct with other women. For a man obsessed with the deep truths of science, Martin is a most shallow and immature person emotionally. Whenever a more superficially appealing woman appears, his awareness of Leora's virtues invariably disappears, suggesting that his feelings for her are similarly unsubstantial. In addition to his affair with Orchid, Martin later becomes involved with the wealthy but equally empty Joyce Lanyon, whom he meets during the plague episode. Though he can see Joyce correctly as a "quite useless young woman" (A, 369), his adolescent awe of her refinement and sophistication leads him to dismiss Leora as



"coarse and thick" (A, 370) by comparison, and ignore her more meaningful qualities. Just as he has little true appreciation of Leora's worth, so is Martin generally indifferent to her; nowhere in the novel does he make even the slightest effort to accommodate or even consider seriously her needs and desires. Her one pathetic ambition, to travel to France, is never actualized, because of this indifference on his part to her wishes. Nor is Martin merely indifferent to her; at times he is positively cruel. On one occasion, when his desire to be "respectable" is strong, he attempts much as did Madeline with him, to "Improve" her; unbraiding her for her sloppiness -- "'Why can't you take a little time to make yourself attractive? God knows you haven't anything else to do'" (A, 236) -- he is oblivious to the obvious reflection on his own thoughtlessness and insensitivity that such a comment reveals.

From his actions, then, it is doubtful that Martin loves Leora in a meaningful way. Rather, he can only appreciate her insofar as she is unobtrusive and convenient, a person to be used and relied on for comfort and reassurance, but otherwise one to be ignored. Lewis himself substantiates this estimation of his feelings for her when Leora is alone in her room at St. Hubert, during the plague: "She knew the direction of St. Swithin's Parish -- beyond that delicate glimmer of lights from palm huts coiling up the hills. She concentrated on it, wondering if by some magic she might not have a signal from him, but she could get no feeling of his looking toward her. She sat long and quiet. . . .She had nothing to do" (A, 373). Shortly after, she dies of plague, alone; Martin is far from her, as indifferent to her at the time of her death as he was when she was alive.

From this evidence, it is plain that although Leora certainly





fulfills the requirements of an ideal wife, she is "ideal" only in that no effort is required on Martin's part to consider her wishes in any way. Since love must involve a genuine concern of some sort for the beloved's welfare, and since nowhere in the novel is Martin seen displaying any such concern, it must be concluded that, while Leora's love for Martin is indisputable (and for that matter, almost beyond human capability), his feeling for her is merely the attraction that a selfish, immature individual would have for a person who makes no demands whatsoever, whose "perfection" consists merely in her convenient submissiveness.

Through intentionally presenting his hero Martin in such a way, Lewis reveals an important development in his assessment of the true individual. It will be remembered that in the early novels, characters such as Mr. Wrenn, Carl Ericson and Una Golden all achieved both their personal ambitions and happy marriages with relative ease; however, as was mentioned in Chapter I, their success in both areas was inserted by Lewis at the expense of fictional logic and credibility. In Arrowsmith Lewis has reached the stage where he can no longer overlook the problems that may attend the attainment of an individual's personal aspirations in life, for now it is seen that the pursuit of and dedication to this goal is essentially selfish, and may entail the subordination of other considerations, in particular one's concern for the feelings of others. Martin's very inability to respond meaningfully even to the ideal mate that Leora most certainly is suggests again that, like Gottlieb, he also may well be incapable of true loving, even when the person is one so easy to love as Leora. Lewis thus reinforces the point he made earlier with Gottlieb, and one that applies to many true individuals; that an inhumanity, an imperviousness to human sentiment may often



accompany his men of integrity.

At one point, the demanding Gottlieb quarrels with his student Martin, who leaves the university in anger to wander about the country. During this period, he realizes the extent of his need for Leora and arrives at her home in Wheatsylvania, North Dakota, to claim her. Products of the 'Main Street' mentality, Leora's "thin, faded, unhumorous" (A, 98) mother, her "undistinguished and sun-worn" (A, 99) father, and her pompous brother Bert, who "believed in town-boosting, organized motor-tours, Boy Scouts, baseball, and the hanging of I.W.W.'s" (A, 99) together represent all the meanness and rigidity of small-town society. At first, Martin attempts to defy her family by marrying Leora secretly, but they apply pressure of their own, demanding that the marriage not be consummated until Martin should complete his studies. Foolishly, Martin agrees to their terms, unaware that in submitting to them he has compromised his own desires to those of this microcosmic society, from which it will take years to escape. Following this initial capitulation to Leora's family, Martin returns to Zenith to beg humbly for readmittance to the medical school; as he is suitably penitent and contrite, so he is accepted. Now conforming to the demands of the university, he loses sight of his mentor Gottlieb and his original goal; as such he ironically wins "the admiration of Dr. Silva /the Dean/ and all the Good Students" (A, 109). Even though he is not utterly lost to conventionality, and as Lewis reminds us "could not forget the cool ascetic hours in the laboratory" (A, 112), his original aspirations have become dormant, and following his graduation he moves to Leora's home town to become a country doctor. In this petty and conformity-ridden community



whose citizens "commented on his digestion, his mail, his walks, his shoes that needed cobbling" (A, 143), Lewis remarks that "the free and virile land was leagues away" (A, 142). The victim of constant criticism over his slightest unconventionality, "he could not rid himself of twitchy discomfort at their unending and maddeningly detailed comments on everything. He felt as though the lightest word he said in his consultation-room would be megaphoned from flapping ear to ear all down the country roads" (A, 162). In Wheatsylvania his position is superficially similar to Carol Kennicott's, and like her, he sees that "unless he struggled, not only would he harden into timid morality under the pressure of the village, but he fixed in a routine of prescriptions and bandaging" (A, 162). Unlike Carol, of course, Martin possesses within him a genuine alternative goal in life that will enable him to escape to a more meaningful existence. Eventually, his old love of research is stimulated by an outbreak of cattle disease; Martin investigates the vaccine being administered to the dying animals, and finds it is useless. Producing his own, he succeeds, and seeing once again wherein his true interests lie, assumes the duties of the county health-inspector, hoping to combine research with his medical practice. Unfortunately, his battles with public ignorance frustrate him; he becomes a laughing-stock, following a wrong diagnosis of small-pox. Finally he can take no more, and resolves to escape. Whereas Carol had no concept of what she wished to do, Martin is most definite in his desires. "'By God,'" he tells Leora, "'I know what I can do! Gottlieb saw it! And I want to get to work'" (A, 182).

However, he is not to be satisfied in his new position as Assistant Health Director in Nautilus, a small city much like Babbitt's Zenith, the only difference being that although "in both cases the streets look





alike . . . in Nautilus they do not look alike for so many miles" (A, 186). Martin is the assistant to Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh, who appears initially as a boistrous, bumptious buffoon of a man. With his foolish daughters, his absurd poems promoting health, and his garish advertising campaigns, Pickerbaugh has made a business of promoting hygiene in the community at the expense, Martin discovers, of any scientific accuracy. Pickerbaugh's method is to jolly the citizens through any means, no matter how undignified, into an awareness of the necessity for health; in verse and aphorism, he "recommended good health, good roads, good business, and the single standard of morality" (A, 190.) Notably, he defends his manipulation of statistics and his vulgar methods of coercing the public into healthful ways on the pragmatic grounds that his campaigns actually do good. Himself aware that his "'statistics aren't always exact,'" he rationalizes that "'if we can get people to have more fresh air and cleaner yards and less alcohol, we're justified'" (A, 217). As such, he at least appears to be sincere. However, it soon becomes apparent that Pickerbaugh's promotion of health does not stem from a pure desire to benefit the community for its own good, but in fact has primary value in his eyes as a means of increasing the citizens' role as effective producers of wealth for the leaders of society. For example, "When Pickerbaugh addressed a church or the home circle he spoke of 'the value of health in making life more joyful,' but when he addressed a business luncheon he changed it to 'the value in good round dollars and cents of having workmen who are healthy and sober, and therefore able to work faster at the same wages'" (A, 219). In addition, Lewis hints throughout that Pickerbaugh is using the publicity from his position as health director to further a burgeoning poli-



tical career. Even in their initial conversation, Pickerbaugh predicts (as it turns out, accurately) that Martin will replace him, "Pickerbaugh himself having gone off to mysterious and interesting activities in a Larger Field" (A, 198).

Furthermore, it soon becomes evident that despite Pickerbaugh's optimistic and ingenuous appearance, he is as cynical a manipulator of the public as any encountered in Lewis' work; actually, his foolish and vulgar promotional devices presuppose an underlying contempt and disregard for the masses' intelligence identical to that displayed by Jake Offutt in Babbitt. As he is yet another example of a social leader exerting power over a credulous and gullible public, so there is also a "slimy trail of the dollar which he /Martin/ beheld in Pickerbaugh's most ardent eloquence" (A, 218). On one occasion, when Martin advocates genuine reforms such as pasteurization of milk or the destruction of disease-ridden tenement houses, Pickerbaugh balks as this might offend the monied interests in the community. As a result, Martin's "contemplation moved beyond Almus Pickerbaugh to all leaders, of armies or empires, of universities or churches, and he saw that most of them were Pickerbaughs" (A, 219). Final proof of Pickerbaugh's insincerity occurs when he runs for Congress, capitalizing on the publicity he received when health director, indicating clearly that he was using his position merely as a stepping-stone to greater power.

As Nautilus is merely a smaller version of Zenith, so all the same pressures to conform can be found here as well. His old classmate Irv Watters, who had "learned many new things about which to be dull" (A, 203), lives in Nautilus and advises Martin to "'join the country



club and take up golf'" (A, 204), and associate only with "'the good, solid, conservative, successful business men'" (A, 204). Against his will, Martin does find himself "drafted into many of the associations, clubs, lodges, and 'causes' with which Nautilus foamed" (A, 205). Fortunately, events combine to reawaken him once again to an awareness of his true ambition in life. When an outside expert is brought in to verify a charge Martin has brought against a disease-ridden dairy, he confesses to Leora that "'that man. . .with his freedom from bunk he's made me wild to get back to research'" (A, 230). Shortly after, when Pickerbaugh has left for Washington, Martin is made temporary Director of Health and told not to be "brash"; the mayor advises him to cease the laboratory work and devote his time to "'jolly along these sobs that are always panning the administration'" (A, 249). Since his purpose in the leaders' eyes is merely to remain as innocuous and inoffensive as was Pickerbaugh, and provide no real threat to their positions and wealth, when Martin challenges the establishment by destroying disease-ridden buildings its wrath is unleashed upon him. The majority of the community's church and business leaders combine against him because his defiance poses a threat to their secure and affluent positions; even the general public is incited against him. Martin tries to fight but fails, seeing that the forces of society are simply too powerful to overcome, and he leaves Nautilus a bitter and disillusioned man. Here again Lewis is suggesting that escape from one's surroundings is often the only answer, since Martin's attempt to work within the social structure has proved to be a dismal failure.

After a short period spent at the Rouncefield Clinic, a "most





competent, most clean and brisk and visionless medical factory" (A, 259) which exists solely to make money, Martin is invited by Gottlieb to join the prestigious McGurk Institute of scientific research, a position he accepts enthusiastically. There he initially believes that he finally has escaped the restrictions imposed on him in the past by society; at McGurk there appears to be no trace of compromising, no existence of ulterior motives. Total freedom for the pursuit of truth would seem to prevail. Gottlieb assures him that the term "success" does not exist at McGurk. Here alone the scientist can be truly isolated from society, immune to its myths and above its demands; here, supposedly, he can seek those "inexorable laws" of nature with impunity. Martin's prayer of the scientist -- "'God give me strength not to trust to God'" (A, 269) -- is in fact an appeal for this freedom from the unfounded faiths, beliefs and pressures of the everyday world.

However, though it initially appears that Martin has found this personal freedom for which he has prayed, imperfections soon begin to surface. The Institution is, despite the loftiness of its ostensible aims, the personal plaything of McGurk's wife Capitola, whose husband, an obvious leader of society, "bought the Institute not only to glorify himself but to divert Capitola and keep her itching fingers out of his shipping and mining and lumber interests, which would not too well have borne the investigations of a Great White Uplifter" (A, 281). In a sense, its ideals have been compromised from the outset for, whether consciously or not, the scientists are in fact serving the interests of a leader of society, albeit in a most subtle way, by contributing vicariously to McGurk's "excuse for having lived" (A, 281).



Nor are the scientists themselves the idealistic individuals Martin had expected to find; intensely jealous of each other's work, they are fiercely competitive despite their facade of camaraderie. Martin sees that "no rocking-chair clique on a summer-hotel porch, no knot of actors, ever whispered more scandal or hinted more warmly of complete idiocy in their confreres than did these uplifted scientists" (A, 285).

Although Martin initially believes the Director, DeWitt Tubbs, to be an exception to the pettiness he sees around him, it soon becomes apparent that Tubbs' desire for personal power has overcome whatever sincerity to research he may originally have had. Martin first sees him as "one of the few leaders of mankind who could discourse on any branch of knowledge, yet could control practical affairs and drive stumbling mankind on to sane and reasonable ideals" (A, 272). However, whatever genuine scientific aspirations Tubbs may have had in the past have been replaced by his ambition to succeed as an administrator. Though he claims to be doing research in his private laboratory, Martin wonders "just what experiments Dr. Tubbs had been doing lately. The bench seemed rather unused" (A, 274). Later, Tubbs' true venality becomes more apparent. At one point, Martin believes he is on the verge of discovering something truly significant, but his scrupulous devotion to accuracy forces him not to publish what he knows are only tentative results. Tubbs is appalled, and informs Martin bluntly that "'the basic aim of this Institution is the conquest of disease, not making pretty scientific notes'" (A, 307). Furthermore, he attempts to cajol Martin into publishing with the offer of a department headship and a raise in salary; this



appeal to pride and success bothers Martin, as it qualifies somewhat that idealistic devotion to truth for its own sake which he had formerly thought characterized the Institute. In addition, Tubbs' comments reveal a desire to partake incidentally of the possible glory Martin's researches may bring him: "'My boy, we may have found the real thing -- another salvarsan! We'll publish together! We'll have the whole world talking'" (A, 308, my italics). Seeing that Tubbs is applying pressures identical to those which he has encountered in the past, Martin feels that "his work seemed to have been taken from him, his own self had been taken from him; he was no longer to be Martin, and Gottlieb's disciple, but a Man of Measured Merriment, Dr. Arrowsmith, Head of the Department of Microbic Pathology, who would wear severe collars and make addresses and never curse" (A, 308). It is no mistake that Tubbs sounds remarkably practical and businesslike in his appeal to Martin: "'This is no longer an age of parochialism but of competition, in art and science just as much as in commerce -- co-operation with your own group, but with those outside it, competition to the death'" (A, 310). Here the true motives behind the Institute are exposed, and Martin sees accordingly that his potential prominence is propelling him into a competitive and success-oriented world which, as Tubbs has unwittingly revealed, is little different from the world of business and finance.

The suave and debonair Rippleton Holabird also impressed Martin initially. Again though, it soon becomes evident that Holabird is as personally ambitious as Tubbs; following the news of Martin's tentative discovery Holabird confronts him and suggests that "'I see no reason why you shouldn't come in with us, himself and Tubbs and we three run





things here to suit ourselves'" (A, 309). A potential leader, Holabird is similarly anxious for the opportunity to rise in status and increase his personal power; seeing Martin's discovery as a convenient means whereby to accomplish this, he confides to him that "'you and I can become the dictators of science throughout the whole country'" (A, 309). Aware that Holabird's ambitious scheming is a far cry from the ideal world he had believed the Institute would provide, Martin is appalled and "perceived the horror of the shrieking bawdy thing called Success, with its demand that he give up quiet work and parade forth to be pawed by every blind devotee and mud-spattered by every blind enemy" (A, 309). Once again he becomes aware that his pure dedication to the ideal of research and truth is in conflict with the compromising motives of glory-hungry men.

Martin is ironically saved from success by a foreign scientist's publication of his very experiment. Tubbs naturally withdraws the offer of a promotion, but later conceives a way of salvaging some of the glory he thought had been lost, and suggests that Martin apply the results of his discovery practically. Though he rationalizes that his wish is merely "'to do something big, my boy, something fine for poor humanity, before I pass on'" (A, 316), the sincerity of this altruistic sentiment is doubtful, especially in light of his subsequent actions. For, shortly thereafter, Tubbs resigns from McGurk to organize a "League of Cultural Agencies", an institution that plans to co-ordinate all intellectual pursuits in a competitive way, with Tubbs as the ultimate source of power, directing and manipulating the efforts of innumerable men. The desire to become master of ever-enlarging institutional forces is an incidental



aspect of Lewis' social leaders, and is examined again in the subsequent Elmer Gantry.

The expedition organized to treat the victims of the plague-stricken island of St. Hubert with Martin's discovery has in part also been conceived by McGurk himself; to Gottlieb "Ross McGurk, over a comfortable steak, hinted not too diffidently, that this expedition was the opportunity for the Institute to acquire world-fame" (A, 333). Gottlieb agrees to authorize it, but only on the condition that Martin will deny the serum to a portion of the population in order to test its efficacy, a condition which Martin accepts. Naturally, Martin's belief in the importance of obtaining lasting proof of his discovery's value conflicts with the practical desire of the St. Hubert residents to be cured. As such, it crystallizes the conflict between the value of truth and that of expediency which has accompanied Martin throughout his life, for again the truth to which Martin has dedicated himself is threatened by those oblivious to its value.

With the expedition goes Gustaf Sondelius, the "famous disease-fighter", another example of a true individual. Distinct from Martin and Gottlieb in personality and ideals, his values are nevertheless equally definite and meaningful, Lewis reminding us through him that he is not extolling the virtues of pure scientific research at the expense of all other considerations. Sondelius also insists that Martin's withholding of the serum is heartless, but there is little real argument here, for the proof Martin might obtain would save potential millions in the future; as Gottlieb says, "'you may be the man who ends all plague'" (A, 339). Lewis is in obvious sympathy with the position taken by Martin regarding



his need to be immediately cruel in order to be ultimately kind, as it were. Martin's ability to resist the pathetic pleas of the suffering inhabitants for his cure is viewed throughout as a sign of strength; nor is it easy for him to resist the natural sympathy he feels for the victims: "the citizens came in committees to beg him to heal their children, and he was so shaken that he had ever to keep before him the vision of Gottlieb" (A, 365-366). By the same token, when Leora dies and Martin breaks down, giving the serum to everyone, he is meant to be seen as having succumbed, not so much to his humanity, but to his weakness. That it is weakness on his part is reinforced by Lewis' numerous allusions to his excessive drinking during this period. Later, when Holabird writes to praise him for the "glory" he has brought the Institute, Martin sees wryly that it is a glory bought at the expense of truth: "The more they shouted his glory, the more he thought about what unknown, tight-minded scientists in distant laboratories would say of a man who had had his chance and cast it away. The more they called him the giver of life, the more he felt himself disgraced and a traitor (A, 381).

Only Terry Wickett, one of the few truly dedicated scientists at McGurk, sees that "'you bunged it up badly'" (A, 388). In Terry Wickett Lewis adds another character to his cast of dedicated individuals. A stronger figure than Martin, Wickett at no point in the novel is seen compromising his values. When Holabird orders him to do more practical research, he resigns and erects a private laboratory in the Vermont woods. Notably, he too is completely isolated from all aspects of society, by choice; as he has no friends other than Martin and Gottlieb and appears to have no interest in women whatever, he is also presented as somewhat inhuman in his dedication and integrity.





With Leora dead, Martin's desire for companionship leads him back to Joyce Lanyon. Joyce is attracted to Martin, seeing him as a welcome change from her boring and empty life; "in his contempt for ease and rewards she found exhilaration" (A, 391). In addition, Martin reminded her of when she had assisted him on St. Hubert with the patients, the "only time in her life when she had felt useful and independent" (A, 394). Lewis speaks of Joyce as an "Arranger and even an Improver" (A, 304), a woman not unlike the once-discarded Madeline Fox in her desire to mould Martin into respectability. She thinks of him as "Her Man", "and if she would but be patient with him, she could make him master polo and clothes and conversation" (A, 397). Similarly, she "expected him to remember her birthday, her taste in wine, her liking for flowers, and her objection to viewing the process of shaving" (A, 398). In short, she not only embodies but virtually culminates in her person all the pressures to respectability that Martin has encountered previously. Martin and Joyce marry, but as would be expected, he soon comes to loathe her world and the demands his new social position make on his personal freedom.

The event that precipitates Martin's ultimate renunciation of society and sends him fleeing to the isolation of Wickett's private laboratory is Holabird's announcement that the Institute is planning to affiliate with Tubb's League of Cultural Agencies. Holabird informs him that "'we are at last going to make all the erstwhile chaotic spiritual activities of America conform to the American Ideal; we're going to make them as practical and supreme as the manufacture of cash-registers'" (A, 422). Realizing that this would reduce the Institute



and himself to the role of society's servant, Martin sees that "'I've suddenly seen I must go! I want my freedom to work, and I herewith quit whining about it and grab it'" (A, 425). And so he does, though rather incredibly, leaving behind him his wife and child in the process for the idyllic seclusion of the Vermont woods. Joyce unsuccessfully attempts to convince him to return; angrily she accuses him of being "insane" which Martin admits, seeing that in the eyes of an uncomprehending and indoctrinated world his rejection of and escape from all the comfort and material security is insanity; to Martin, of course, his escape is the only conceivable solution if he is to be truly free.

Schorer, among others, was unimpressed with the novel's conclusion, regarding it as "a little fantastic, that ending, and quite unpersuasive."<sup>8</sup> Other critics complained that, if Arrowsmith's final act was meant to be seen as admirable, it was far from the course of action one would expect to be taken by an admirable man. Grebstein, seeing that "the novel's final conclusion implies. . .that the scientist is truest to himself and to mankind when he rejects his own humanity,"<sup>9</sup> wondered as to the truth of this somewhat contentious thesis. Dooley also questioned if "the quest for scientific knowledge /should/ override every other consideration," and added that, while "the pursuit of truth to the exclusion of error is clearly something desirable; the pursuit of scientific truth to the exclusion of all human values is something else again."<sup>10</sup> In short, Lewis' major critics are in general agreement that the novel's bizarre ending and the hero's questionable moral qualities have detracted from the total effect of the book. However, two points may be raised in Lewis' defence. First, though the



ending is indeed "fantastic", it is nevertheless perfectly consistent with Lewis' portrayal of a true individual, totally committed to his inner convictions. Logically, there is certainly no other alternative open to Martin, if he is to retain his integrity; too dedicated to research ever to give it up, too strong an individual ever to submit to the docile role Joyce desires of him, he cannot succumb even when his escape entails the desertion of his wife and child. Secondly, that Martin's degree of dedication is almost beyond human capability, far from being a lapse in the novel's realism, is precisely Lewis' point. The very fact that few men could aspire to a goal with such uncompromising single-mindedness and sacrifice both the comforts of civilization and their own humanity in the process indicates that the truly dedicated individual is indeed rarely encountered in life. The novel's effect is thus intensified, Lewis having reinforced our realization of society's power; that most men would in fact have relinquished the struggle at some point in their lives gives us added awareness of the difficulties involved in maintaining one's personal values. At the same time, Lewis does not wish us to reject out of hand the possibility that human integrity can prevail in the world, a conclusion to which we might be led from the way in which the hero has been presented to us; though pessimistic, Lewis did not despair utterly for mankind. Thus he inserts throughout the book other figures similar to, though distinct from, Martin Sondelius, Terry Wickett and Gottlieb all serve to strengthen the position that such men of integrity, though rare, can indeed exist in society.

It has been shown that Arrowsmith presents the conflict between





the true individual and society with considerable complexity. Here Lewis pursues the problems that arise from the novel's basic situation with greater diligence than in his earlier work, and is for the first time not content merely to ignore or smooth them over. Though Gottlieb and Martin without question are true individuals and meant to be respected as such, they are also seen as selfish, egotistical and somewhat inhuman as well. Similarly, the leaders of society are presented as far from purely evil and damnable; men like Tubbs, as Martin realizes, paradoxically serve a definite and even useful purpose in society, despite their venality. In short, Lewis was able in Arrowsmith to refrain from assigning to the novel's various characters simple moral labels. Furthermore, though the author still laments the seemingly inevitable tendency in man to lose sight of his aspirations and capitulate to society, here he can also acknowledge that this society by necessity must be restrictive and confining if any form of social order is to exist. The ultimate problem that emerges from Arrowsmith is that it appears impossible to impose those restrictions necessary to maintain social stability without incurring an excessive repression of human individuality as well. For the true individual caught in this basic social situation, a total withdrawal from the community -- which may involve the sacrifice of a great deal -- is nevertheless often the only solution if personal freedom is to be achieved.

For these reasons, then, the novel is Lewis' most mature and sophisticated. In suspending judgment on his characters, in presenting us with realistic dilemmas and problems, and most importantly, in refraining from his usual recourse to a flaccidly happy conclusion in an attempt to



"resolve" these problems, Lewis has presented us with a picture of a complex and variegated society rather than an artificially simple and unrealistic one.



## ELMER GANTRY: SOCIETY'S LEADER

Of all Lewis' novels, Elmer Gantry has caused the most violent critical response. When it appeared in 1927, reviewers tended either to praise or damn the book inordinately. H. L. Mencken was "inclined to think" it Lewis' best work, superior to Main Street and Babbitt. Finding Main Street's ending "vague and somewhat baffling"<sup>1</sup> and Babbitt's liberalism at variance with his earlier conformity, Mencken saw no such flaws in Elmer Gantry: "The story is beautifully designed, and it moves with the inevitability of a fugue. It is packed with observation, all fresh, all shrewd, all sound."<sup>2</sup> Somewhat less justifiably, Mencken went on to praise the "restraint" and "depth" of the novel: "The temptation to make the thing a mere lampoon and the man himself a simple and obvious hypocrite must have been very considerable, but there is no sign of his yielding to it."<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, Mencken believed that Lewis had taken pains to control his personal feelings, that the novel's characters had been portrayed with "decent feeling. There is not a downright rogue among them."<sup>4</sup> Even Gantry himself, Mencken thought, was "sincere."

If Mencken's praise of the novel was extravagant,<sup>5</sup> it was perhaps excusable on certain grounds. As Schorer would later point out, the novel had not only been dedicated to him "with profound admiration"<sup>6</sup> but contained within its pages precisely the same ridicule of fundamentalism that Mencken had been indulging in for years.<sup>7</sup> Other reviewers





were less ecstatic, to say the least; Rebecca West saw no value in the novel whatever, and considered it "probably one of the most disappointing books that a man of genius has ever produced."<sup>8</sup> Effective satire, claimed West, rests on the novelist's possession of, "at least in the world of the imagination, the quality the lack of which he is deriding in others."<sup>9</sup> In portraying Christianity merely as consisting of charlatans on the one hand and fools on the other, Lewis had omitted the element of true spirituality that West believed should at least have been taken into account. Thus, she concluded that Elmer Gantry failed miserably because Lewis "has no vision of the use they [his characters] ought to be making of it [i.e., religion]."<sup>10</sup>

Though both of the above two attitudes are too extreme to be accepted, each has had its share of sympathizers. Robert Cantwell, for example, agreeing in principle with Mencken praised the book as being along with Lewis' other fiction, a brutally accurate indication "simply that American society was death to any disinterested effort, to any human tolerance, almost to any human sympathy."<sup>11</sup> Bernard DeVoto observed that, though deficient as realism, if "considered as the work of a sociologist in fiction, a headlong satire of religious hypocrisy and commercialism written by a man who furiously hates them, it is one of the most invigorating books of our time."<sup>12</sup> Recent critics have been less generous, and have tended to assume a position similar to that of Rebecca West. Both Dooley and Grebstein believe the novel to be altogether too harsh in its indictment of Christianity. As Dooley says, "undoubtedly many of the excesses Lewis describes, especially those connected with revivalism, deserve the treatment they get. Nevertheless, it is soon apparent that he has gone too far; to him, Christianity is not



only untrue, but inconceivable."<sup>13</sup> Grebstein argued that the novel "is too distorted, even too much for satire; it lacks conflict and contrast. Although its very subject is the transcendental, it conveys no sense or grasp of the transcendental."<sup>14</sup> Of all these later critics Thomas Horton was probably the most offended, believing the novel to be "so violent, unfair, and unsympathetic a philippic against the American clergy that it annoyed all intelligent people, believers and atheists alike."<sup>15</sup>

In spite of this, Dooley and Grebstein could not help but admire the power and strength of the novel. To Grebstein the book was "pure" Lewis: "It has snap, flavor, a strong narrative line, a good deal of authenticity, and that peculiar Lewisian tone of simultaneous love and hatred for the hero, although much more hatred than love."<sup>16</sup> Dooley also acknowledged that much in the book was accurate. Even Horton was forced to concede that Elmer Gantry had value, for "until Mr. Lewis did the job it was generally considered in poor taste to question the integrity of men of the cloth."<sup>17</sup> This ambivalent attitude on the critics' part is important, as it illustrates the general difficulty many critics have had in squaring that condemnation of fake religion which they knew to be accurate with the obviously biased view of the author and the consequent narrowness of the novel's realism; certainly Elmer Gantry is both "unfair" and accurate simultaneously. J. W. Krutch and T. K. Whipple, attempting separately to solve this critical problem, saw respectively that the work could have value without necessarily claiming to tell the whole truth about Christianity in America. Krutch commented that, the novel's literary merits aside, the value of Elmer Gantry lay in its record of "a reign of grotesque vulgarity"<sup>18</sup> which would otherwise have gone unrecorded.



Whipple took a similar position, arguing that, within its own limits, every aspect of the work was, lamentably, true: "No doubt every detail of Elmer Gantry is faithfully accurate, and one ought to be grateful to Lewis for so detailed a clinical report on the morbid symptoms which attack religion in a land where the religious spirit is dead."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps wryly, Whipple cited Mencken's "Americana" section of the American Mercury as "proof" of the novel's limited but indisputable accuracy.

Mark Schorer's intensive study of Elmer Gantry is, by his own admission, heavily indebted to Whipple. Simply, Schorer takes the position that in this bleakest of Lewis' novels the very absence of a spiritual alternative therein which Rebecca West had deplored becomes the book's essential message. The novel is a "half-truth", true in that it exposes spiritual depravity, but false in its not allowing for the existence of the spirit. Schorer's analysis of the novel itself is indisputable, but he is not justified in concluding as he does that the corrupt world in Elmer Gantry, admittedly but "a fragment /of life/ blown into the proportions of the whole,"<sup>20</sup> applies to Lewis' fiction in its entirety, for to do so overlooks the many alternatives to such spiritual sterility which Lewis has given us in other novels. The reason for Elmer Gantry's particular bleakness is because Lewis' sole purpose in this novel was to examine social corruption as extensively as possible. For the author also to have emphasized characters who possessed true values would merely have detracted from the investigation at hand of a society that destroys such values and creates human monsters in the process.<sup>21</sup>

Whipple remarked at one point that Lewis' approach to writing was that of an antagonist, much like "a wild animal on the lookout for





its foes, or as a Red Indian in the enemy's country."<sup>22</sup> Certainly this approach is most evident in Elmer Gantry, because here Lewis sets out to study both the milieu and the type of person responsible for the frustrated social malcontents, the credulous automatons and even the isolated individuals that had formed the subjects of his earlier novels.

Interestingly, it is seen that Elmer as an aspiring leader possesses many of the qualities and characteristics which distinguish the true individual such as Arrowsmith. Both are isolated from others, and exist as essentially lonely persons; both are single-minded, and committed to a basic goal in life; both are encouraged along the way by mentors, older individuals who see their "potential"; most importantly, however, both possess a strength and power which separate them from the masses of lesser men.

The major difference between the two character-types lies in the value systems to which they respectively adhere. In Elmer's case, Lewis impresses upon us at the outset that the milieu in which Elmer has been raised is as much responsible for his absolute immorality as is he responsible in turn for the spiritual depravity of those to whom he ministers; if he is a monster, so is his society similarly monstrous. For Elmer from childhood has been taught to embrace the false values of his surroundings to the point where as an adult his values become indistinguishable from those of his society. Thus his only goal is that of self-advancement through whatever means possible, his only values those of social power, prestige and st atus.

In contrast, the true individual has no such belief in the value of power, being by definition more independent of society's values. This in turn reveals an ironic aspect of the leader-figure, for it becomes



evident that he must believe at least in the structure of society as a thing of value in order for him to desire to dominate that structure. Lewis' true individuals, as they are freer by nature, have no such belief in society. Arrowsmith, for example, while seeing the necessity for social organization and leaders, wanted no part of that organization or leadership himself as his own values were more important to him; the aspiring leader Gantry, in contrast, desires ardently to participate in society, though in a supervisory capacity. Thus, although ostensibly above the masses, the leader is actually himself indoctrinated also, at least to the point where he cannot help but conceive of society as something worthy of dominating. Furthermore, in wasting his life in an effort to dominate others, in using his admittedly superior talents merely to achieve empty and futile goals, the leader reveals himself to be as victimized by his surroundings as are any of Lewis' characters.

This introduction of deterministic elements as important factors in the development of Elmer as a leader is most significant, as it keeps the novel from degenerating into mere melodrama. For that matter, Lewis even displays some sympathy for Elmer early in the book. He is seen initially as a vulgar, lusty young student at a small denominational college, a youth utterly lacking in sensitivity, who "could not understand men who shrank from blood, who liked poetry or roses, who did not casually endeavor to seduce every possibly seducible girl" (EG, 16). Though base, Elmer is not as yet consciously evil, and Lewis makes it plain that Elmer's environment will pervert his natural strength, an aspect of him which might have found proper vent in another setting; in fact, he has been miscast in life, as it were, and Lewis adds that "it was lamentable to see this broad young man, who would have been so



happy in the prize-ring, the fish market, or the stock exchange, poking through the cobwebbed corridors of Terwillinger" (EG, 13) College.

In Elmer Gantry the religious establishment in general and the fundamentalist movement in particular are meant to be seen as epitomizing all the rigidity Lewis believed could be found throughout society. For here virtually every aspect of the milieu in which Elmer moves is dominated by the all-powerful Protestant (Baptist) Church, a barren, vulgarized institution which emphasizes the superficials of religion at the expense and disregard of its spiritual essence. As it is superficial, so only a surface display of conformity to its doctrines and conduct is required. For example, the mechanical and empty ritual of baptism by immersion is considered in itself sufficient for salvation, and Lewis comments sarcastically that "Elmer had since the age of sixteen been a member in good standing of the Baptist Church -- he had been most satisfactorily immersed in the Kayooska River" (EG, 34).

Though debased, the Church is an all-pervasive force in the community, and Elmer naturally comes under its influence. It has dominated his every move in life, colouring all areas of thought with its particular interpretation, and allowing him no opportunity for meaningful individual development:

That small pasty-white Baptist church had been the centre of all his emotions, aside from hell-raising, hunger, sleepiness, and love. And even these emotions were represented in the House of the Lord, in the way of tacks in pew-cushions, Missionary suppers with chicken pie and angel's-food cake, soporific sermons, and the proximity of flexible little girls in thin muslin. But the arts and the sentiments and the sentimentalities -- they were for Elmer perpetually associated only with the church.

Except for circus bands, Fourth of July parades, and the singing of "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" and "Jingle Bells" in school, all the music which the boy Elmer had ever heard was in church.

The church provided his only oratory, except for campaign speeches by politicians ardent about Jefferson and the price of binding-twine; it provided all his painting and sculpture, except for the portraits of







Lincoln, Longfellow, and Emerson in the school-building, and the two china statuettes of pink ladies with gilt flower-baskets which stood on his mother's bureau. From the church came all his profounder philosophy, except the teachers' admonitions that little boys who let gartersnakes loose in school were certain to be licked now and hanged later, and his mother's stream of opinions on hanging up his overcoat, wiping his feet, eating fried potatoes with his fingers, and taking the name of the Lord in vain.

If he had sources of literary inspiration outside the church. . . yet here too the church had guided him.

. . . . .  
He had, in fact, got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason. (EG, 31-32, 34).

As the church dominates him, so does it also attempt to "convert" him formally at the least provocation to an official acceptance of its doctrines, and in the process force him to conform to the blind rigidity of thought and subservience of behaviour which it demands of its converts. On one occasion, a drunken Elmer, anxious for an excuse to fight, defends a student-preacher from a mocking bystander, whereupon the community construes his action as implying sympathy with the church and uses the opportunity to apply pressure on him. Prayer-meetings are organized on his behalf; his room is "invaded by hordes of men with uncombed locks on their foreheads, ecstasy in their eyes, and Bibles under their arms. Elmer was safe nowhere. No sooner had he disposed of one disciple. . . than another would pop out from behind a tree and fall on him" (EG, 30). Initially Elmer is able to resist, but when the famous Judson Roberts descends on him, he succumbs. In Roberts Elmer faces a true leader of the religious establishment; a thorough hypocrite, Roberts bullies and cajols "errant" youths like Elmer to conform to the ways of the church. No lie, no foolish appeal to the victim's pride, no grotesque histrionic device, is beyond him. "He was a fair young giant with curly hair and a grin and with a voice like the Bulls of Bashan whenever the strategy



called for manliness" (EG, 44, my italics).

The impressionable Elmer is affected by Roberts' athletic past and his evident ability to combine Christianity with a manly, masculine life. But, lacking any true means of evaluating Roberts, Elmer in fact admires him merely for his physical strength; in a world where all values have been vulgarized, Elmer confuses this strength with spiritual power, unable as he is to distinguish between the two. Thus he agrees to attend his prayer-meeting, and in so doing allows all the forces of the community to be brought to bear on him. Even Elmer's devout mother attends, providing additional pressure to conform. Absent is his one friend, Jim Lefferts, "the college freethinker" (EG, 17) who stands in contrast as a representative of individuality and integrity. Unlike the other students, Jim has been raised by his free-thinking father, apart from the stultifying influences of the religious milieu, and accordingly recognizes the prevailing fundamentalism as an insidious threat to individuality. As a result of his free and unregulated upbringing, distinct personal values have been able to develop within him, and uniquely in the college has "a relish for the flavor of scholarship. He liked to know things about people dead these thousand years, and he liked doing canned miracles in chemistry" (EG, 12). A person of true inner strength, Jim is "hard as ivory and as sleek. Though he came from a prairie village, Jim had fastidiousness, a natural elegance" (EG, 13). Possessing definite, if unmentioned, ambitions<sup>23</sup> "his thin face was resolute. You saw only its youthful freshness first, then behind the brightness a taut determination, and his brown eyes were amiably scornful" (EG, 14).

Jim attempts to make Elmer able to withstand the pressures of the religious establishment; as a force for truth, he battles against



enormous odds on behalf of Elmer's individuality, struggling "to keep Elmer true to the faith" (EG, 36) of intellectual integrity. However, with Jim not present at the prayer-meeting Elmer is powerless against the combined forces of his church, Roberts' appeals to him, and his mother, all of whom live to see him "saved". He is made to feel guilty should he resist, and asks himself "could he be a traitor to them, could he resist the current of their united belief and longing" (EG, 50).

Throughout, the struggle for Elmer's soul is described by Lewis satirically, in an inverted way. The ostensible force of good, the church, in fact represents evil which he tries valiantly to resist; similarly, Lefferts' skepticism is viewed as a fundamentally virtuous human integrity. To his credit, Elmer

longed to be honest, to be true to Jim -- to be true to himself and his own good honest sins and whatsoever penalties they might carry. Then the visions were driven away by voices that closed over him like surf above an exhausted swimmer. Volitionless, marvelling at the sight of himself as a pinioned giant, he was being urged forward, forced forward, his mother on one arm and Judson on the other, a rhapsodic mob following. (EG, 52)

As such, when he finally succumbs and confesses, Elmer is if anything damned at the instant he is ostensibly "saved".

It is important to note that throughout the conversion scene, Lewis emphasizes Elmer's passive role in the process -- "the willing was not his but the mob's; the phrases were not his but those of the emotional preachers and hysterical worshippers whom he had heard since babyhood" (EG, 53) -- suggesting that initially, at any rate, Elmer is clearly a victim of forces beyond his control. However, the efforts to render him both accepting of the community's religion and also subservient to it are only half-successful, because although Elmer is made to accept the church as supreme, its false values as genuine, his innate





strength cannot be utterly suppressed. The result is that this strength which might under different circumstances have been developed in other, possibly legitimate directions, can now only manifest itself within the structure of the church, since he has been conditioned to believe that only through the church can he act meaningfully. Ironically, then, the prayer-meeting, designed to render Elmer humble as well as credulous and accepting, liberates his incipient lust for power and his resulting evil influence in society, since it is here that he first sees a medium whereby to utilize his strength with apparent impunity.

After he has come forward to testify, the audience demands that he speak; as he does so, his initial embarrassment changes "into a robust self-satisfaction" (EG, 54). Pride at his ability to influence the crowd swells within him: "The Elmer Gantry who had for years pretended that he relished defying the whole college had for those same years desired popularity. He had it now -- popularity, almost love, almost reverence, and he felt overpoweringly his role as leading man" (EG, 54).

As he becomes proud, so he also develops a cynical attitude as he reflects on the ease with which he dominated the crowd during his testimonial. When asked to speak again, he borrows his topic from the writings of Robert Ingersoll, whom he knows to be a freethinker, reasoning that "'chances are nobody there tonight has ever read Ingersoll'" (EG, 62). This contempt for his audience's intelligence is substantiated, for the second sermon is similarly a huge success. Despite the fact that his talk is merely a hodge-podge of clichés and aphorisms borrowed from a thousand vaguely-remembered sermons, the audience, "who ought to have seen the sources, . . . took perfectly seriously" (EG, 63) Elmer's histrionic flourishes. Their gullibility is ludicrous as they listen respectfully



to him; so mindless are they, so unreflective, that "not one of them considered that there could be anything comic in the spectacle of a large young man, divinely fitted for coal-heaving, standing up and wallowing in thick slippery words about Love and the Soul" (EG, 63). Later, as a student-minister, Elmer's empty rhetoric is **again** taken as a sign of his spiritual strength. The deacon's daughter Lulu, whom Elmer seduces, regards him as "the best and most learned and strongest and much the most interesting person she had ever known" (EG, 116). It is perhaps little wonder that for his part Elmer feels no regard for Lulu at all, thinking of her as a "brainless little fluffy chick, who would be of no help in impressing rich parishioners" (EG, 116).

The above examples suggest that Elmer's ability to speak publicly is one of the most important single causes of his subsequent success as a religious leader. It is important to note that, though his oratory is but a mere superficial, mechanical device, it is always capable of eliciting the desired emotional response from a public able only to respond to such superficials; the quality or content of his sermons is by and large irrelevant to their successful reception, as Elmer soon learns. Thus, he will continue throughout his life to lambaste his gullible throngs with basically the same sermon that began his career, aware that its vagueness and irrelevance are actually necessary if it is to be accepted by the masses as wise and profound. Were it to have tangible meaning or true spiritual significance, it would almost by definition present a challenge to the community's false values, maintenance of which is so essential to the preservation of their smug and complacent docility. In this world of spiritually blinded people, aware only of the superficials of religion and ignorant of its essence, any high-sounding



sequence of spiritually-intoned but meaningless words is more than enough to satisfy them; Elmer's continuing success rests on his awareness of this.

If Elmer's involvement with the church is hypocritical, so he is far from unique; on the contrary, Lewis insists that we see him merely as one of many who have sacrificed their personal beliefs and aspirations in the process of accepting this debased form of Christianity. Men no less than the dean and president of the College, older men able to see their lives in retrospect, confess to their having qualms as to the worthiness of their lives. The dean, though upbraiding his colleague's doubts, wonders privately if he might not have been a great chemist, and is in fact disillusioned and unsatisfied in his present vocation. Similarly, his in-laws, overheard in bed, express to themselves the same sentiments. Each character in this scene has publicly conformed, but in private resents having done so; all are hypocrites, but all, like Elmer, are also victims of a milieu which denied them the opportunity of living meaningful, honest existences as individuals and forced them into roles both distasteful to themselves and antagonistic to their innate principles of honesty. Though their doubts are naive and childish (such as that concerning the truth of the Immaculate Conception), Lewis implies that, influenced as they have been by a system which demands acceptance of biblical literalism and necessitates a suppression of the imagination in the process of such acceptance, such doubting as that expressed by the dean and his in-laws is all one can expect in a world where the imagination has been all but destroyed. The very absence in Elmer Gantry of more mature and refined minds merely demonstrates further the





power of the environment to stifle such maturity and refinement.

Later, in theological school, Elmer is again seen as merely one of many whose healthy development has been thwarted by the church. His fellow-students are for the most part either gullible, indoctrinated fools or cynical hypocrites. Eddie Fislinger, who pathetically accepts his religion with a blind unreasoning zeal, represents a totally indoctrinated member of the religious establishment. On the other hand, Harry Zenz frankly admits that he is merely in the ministry for the easy life it offers; Horace Carp intends to become a prestigious Episcopalian, "'And then I'll have a social position, and be able to marry a nice rich girl'" (EG, 91). Only in Frank Shallard is there a hint of sensitivity. Frank is one of Lewis' most complete portrayals of the lost rebel, a basically honest man whose environment has denied him the opportunity of discovering true values and acting meaningfully. Though intelligent and receptive, Frank's potential ability to enrich his mind with free and unrestricted intellectual pursuits has been rigidly restricted by the religious milieu in which he was raised: "Though Frank Shallard might have come to admire pictures, great music, civilized furniture, he had been trained to regard them as worldly, and to content himself with art which 'presented a message,' to regard 'Les Miserables' as superior because the bishop was a kind man, and 'The Scarlet Letter' as a poor book because the heroine was sinful and the author didn't mind" (EG, 86). From the outset, then, the chance for an enriched existence has been denied him, despite his possession of innate talent: "There was a good deal of the natural poet in him, and, as is not too rarely the case with poets, something of the reasoning and scientific mind. But both imagination and reason had been submerged in a religion in which doubt was not only



sinful but, much worse, in bad taste" (EG, 119). This being the case, Frank has been conditioned to stifle that healthy questioning of life which Lewis believed was so very important in an individual's development. However, as has been seen previously, man's ability to respond critically to life cannot always be destroyed. Thus, in spite of society's every effort to render him credulous, Frank's intellect forces him to see that the values of his religion are false, its efficacy as an institution marred by the venality and corruption of its leaders. Yet, even with this knowledge, Frank is unable to leave the church, due to his basic weakness and lack of positive convictions, a quality which again links him with Lewis' other lost rebels such as Carol Kennicott, Guy Pollock and Paul Riesling. Though alternatives are offered him by Lewis in the course of the novel, both within and without the church structure, Frank continues to remain within the system, aware that in doing so he is contemptibly hypocritical.

Throughout the book, Frank is seen as weak and indecisive. As a youth, he drifts into theology school because it was expected of him; "that he should become a minister had always been assumed" (EG, 120). As a student, he grows close to Dr. Bruno Zechlin, the seminary's only authentic religious scholar. Though similarly weak, Zechlin is able to see the wastage of his life; having come to doubt the literal truth of Christianity early in his career, "for many years he had rationalized his heresies" (EG, 122). Finally admitting "that he had been fooling himself" (EG, 122), he in fact comes privately to hate the rigid institution the church has become: "Yet he went on as a Baptist preacher, as a teacher of ministerial cubs. He tried to explain it to Frank Shallard without seeming too shameful" (EG, 123). Aware of his own weakness,



Zechlin attempts to prevent Frank from similarly compromising his beliefs and his life. But, though Zechlin tells him to "get out" of the church if he does not truly believe in its doctrines, Frank nevertheless stays in, afraid as he is to defy the establishment and ignorant of a more meaningful course of action: "He clung to the church. It was his land, his patriotism. Nebulously and quite impractically and altogether miserably he planned to give his life to a project called 'liberalizing the church from within'" (EG, 124). That his commitment is nebulous and impractical suggests it cannot be compared with the commitment to a personal goal of Lewis' true individuals; Frank, like Zechlin before him, is merely rationalizing his cowardly inability to leave an institution he actually knows to be valueless.

During his ordination ceremonies Frank goes through the motions of accepting the Baptist doctrine, deceiving himself that his hypocrisy is justified by a desire to save his father from the shock that would accompany his open admission of skepticism. He "hated himself, and ached to flee, but again the traditional 'not wanting to hurt his father' kept him from being honest. So he stayed in the church" (EG, 231). Later, as a preacher, he wonders "whether there was any value to the ministry whatever" (EG, 229); similarly, he concludes that "if there was any value in churches and a ministry, of which he was not very certain, in any case there could be no value in himself as a minister" (EG, 231). Yet, in his weakness he remains.

But weakness is not the only cause of Frank's frustrations. For in fact, a part of him has not escaped the conditioning process to which all men are subjected. As a result, though he can perceive the church's flaws intellectually, he is still emotionally and psychologically bound







to it. This "love-hate" relationship between the lost rebel and society was seen in previous novels. It will be remembered that Paul Riesling revealed an ultimate acceptance of a capitalistic system he professed to hate; similarly, the "egalitarian" Carol Kennicott could not rid herself of her basic snobbery. As would be expected, Frank Shallard is basically more accepting of Christianity than he would consciously care to admit. Though he finally does leave the Baptist church, Lewis remarks that "nor yet could he quite go over to the Unitarians. He still revered Jesus of Nazareth as the one path to justice and kindness and. . .he still had an unreasoned feeling that Jesus was of more than human birth, and veritably the Christ" (EG, 319, my italics).

Though Lewis despised institutionalized religion, he did not discount the possibility that one could dedicate himself meaningfully to the religious life. In Andrew Pengilly, one of the few true individuals in the book, such a person is portrayed. Pengilly, as an individual, lives alone, apart from a society that seeks to stereotype its clergy to an acceptable mould. Like other Lewis individuals, he has had considerable experience in life (as a soldier in the Civil War) before committing himself to the church. As an embodiment of integrity, he lives his religion, believing with a true faith in the efficacy of his calling. Truly spiritual, he has little use for "modern methods" and is distressed by the businesslike machine which the church has become. Unconcerned with petty doctrinal differences, he embraces much that is good in all denominations, though he is nominally a Methodist. Alone in the novel Pengilly realizes that a true acceptance of religion is founded on faith unmixed with sterile intellectualizing; as he asks Frank, "'don't we feel his influence on our lives'" (EG, 237). Something



of a mystic, Pengilly finds God in Nature rather than in books, and exposes Frank's approach to religion as purely negative.

Though encouraged by Pengilly, Frank is called to a new pastorate, and the old gentleman's influence wanes. For that matter, Frank could be said to use the example of Pengilly as yet another poor excuse for remaining within the religious institution from which he is actually too weak to escape. Certainly he uses his wife and children in this way, rationalizing that "with a wife and three children he could not consider leaving the church; and the moment he realized it he began to feel trapped and to worry about his conscience all the more" (EG, 240). That his conscience bothers him suggests that he secretly recognizes his hypocrisy in using others to justify his own inertia.

For whatever reason, be it personal weakness or the extent of his conditioning, Frank, like Carol Kennicott, is unable to perceive an alternative course of action. When in the war, he searches for such an alternative to preaching that would still satisfy his desire to aid others, "and in bewildered reflection he could think of no other way of 'doing something for them' than to go on preaching" (EG, 319). Though he moves to the more liberal Congregationalist denomination, his "escape" is fallacious, since it merely takes place within a general religious structure he does not have the strength to discard. The move is merely a pathetic attempt to satisfy the need for escape without involving the actual rejection of the institution in its entirety. Lewis does not intend us to regard Frank's move as legitimate, and refers to him as having at this stage "halted in his fumbling for honesty" (EG, 319).

To Philip McGarry, a friend and fellow-clergyman, Frank voices his disillusionment with the ministry and his contempt for himself.



Like Pengilly, McGarry is a similarly sincere and dedicated individual, though different in temperament. Lewis also implies through McGarry that an honest dedication to the church is far from unthinkable. Importantly, McGarry is aware of Frank's weakness, seeing it as responsible for his frustrations. After listening to Frank complain about the hypocrisy involved in praising a man at his funeral who was unworthy of such praise, McGarry comments acutely that "'maybe it's your fault, not the church's, young Frank, if you're so scared of your people that you lie at funerals'" (EG, 356). McGarry sees that Frank prefers "'arguing more than you do patiently working out the spiritual problems of some poor, dumb, infinitely piteous human being that comes to you for help'" (EG, 357). Totally trapped and unable to see a way out, Frank is as McGarry says able only to rage feebly within a system from which he lacks the courage to escape. Unable either to rise beyond skepticism like Pengilly or to move meaningfully within the structure with the hope of changing its more obvious absurdities like McGarry, Frank remains in despair, admitting pathetically that he is "'a man too feeble to stand up and risk being called a crank or a vile atheist'" (EG, 360).

Ironically, it is Elmer who exposes Frank's weakness most obviously. Elmer, now a rising Methodist minister, wishes to win a wealthy parishioner of Frank's church over to him, and unscrupulously exposes Frank's inner doubts and personal misgivings in public. Naturally, Frank is asked to resign, and initially fancies himself doing so dramatically, defying his persecutors and exposing their hypocrisy in the process: "he saw himself, then, tramping down the aisle among his gaping hearers, and leaving the church forever. But: 'I'm too tired. Too miserable. And why hurt the poor bewildered souls? And -- I am so tired'" (EG, 371).





His intrinsic weakness dominates him once again, and he bows to the demands of his church, resigning meekly.

Shortly after his resignation he is asked to give a speech on behalf of anti-fundamentalists during the Dayton evolution trial and accepts, exclaiming that he has at last "'found that religion I've been looking for'" (EG, 375). However, though his commitment to liberalism suggests a certain strength on his part, it merely represents another naive and negative reaction to the existing religious system; as such, it cannot be considered a meaningful alternative to his life as a clergyman. First, the speech itself is nothing other than a basic condemnation of the existing religious institution. In this it is not unlike Carol Kennicott's critical assessment of Gopher Prairie, consisting only of purely negative criticism and offering no meaningful alternative to existing conditions. Secondly, in his assumption that he can enlighten society with a single attack on religious dogmas that have been entrenched in the community for centuries, we cannot but be reminded again of Carol Kennicott, in her naive attempts to impose new customs on the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie. In short, Frank is still festering within and unable to escape the dominance of society. Thus, although he is physically destroyed by sadistic thugs, following his feeble critique of religion,<sup>24</sup> Lewis has made it obvious that Frank is himself in the main responsible for his failure in life.

It will be noticed that Frank's story is meant to contrast with Elmer's. As Frank moves through various levels of self-awareness, so Elmer becomes steadily less honest; as Frank rejects society's values, so Elmer embraces them for purposes of personal gain. As has been mentioned, prior to his "conversion" Elmer was in fact merely lusty;



only after did he become evil. Similarly, following his expulsion from the seminary for drunkenness, he becomes a "not unsuccessful" travelling-salesman and it is implied that during this period is living, if not a particularly moral existence, at least a less hypocritical one. Ironical also is it that religion again, in the person of the evangelist Sharon Falconer, serves as the means whereby Elmer is once more channelled to a life of evil and corruption.

Sharon Falconer is a complete embodiment of the leader-figure. Beautiful and intelligent, she is also ambitious, ruthless and proud; in short, she possesses all those requirements Lewis believed were necessary for social leadership. Sharon's effect on Elmer is twofold. First, having attended one of her services out of idle curiosity, he becomes immediately infatuated with her magnetic, compelling personality. Secondly, he is returned to an awareness of his original purpose in life as a religious leader, seeing that "'This is the outfit I've been looking for! Here's where I could go over great'" (EG, 157).

It soon becomes obvious that Sharon is motivated by an all-consuming desire for self-glorification. Believing herself to be beyond moral laws, she informs Elmer that "'I can't sin! I am above sin! I am really and truly sanctified! Whatever I may choose to do, though it might be sin in one unsanctified, with me God will turn it to his glory'" (EG, 173). From this supremely vain premiss, it follows in her own mind, at any rate, that her every act -- be it in itself cruel, callous or immoral -- can be excused on the grounds of her "sanctification", that she can act as she pleases with complete impunity. Nevertheless, immoral and unprincipled she most certainly is, if her actions are any indication. Though aware that Elmer is "completely unscrupulous",



Sharon is impressed by his ability to move her audiences with his oratory, and takes him on as her assistant, discharging her incumbent assistant, the devoted Cecil Aylston, in the process; even though she knows that in doing so she is destroying Cecil, she is callously unconcerned.

Sharon's success as an evangelist stems from her shrewd ability to analyse the public's spiritual deficiencies and give the illusion of fulfilling them. Capitalizing on the public's debased value system, she merely carries its emphasis on the superficials of life to a logical extreme, realizing that an appearance of piety and humility is all that is necessary to impress masses unable to perceive beyond the surface-world of appearances, that a careful cultivation of her public image is alone necessary to ensure her success. In fact, there is no relationship whatever between this public image and her true character. Every aspect of the "public" Sharon is in fact fictitious, a huge hoax perpetrated on a gullible and superficial public, a totality of hypocrisies; her name, her claims of aristocratic lineage, her home in the Deep South, are all false, having been acquired to lend credence to her public image.

But, though shrewd and cunning, Sharon too is ironically victimized by this image, for, as the public worships her, so Sharon has also come to believe her own lies, and worships herself accordingly. At her "ancestral home" the full extent of her megalomania is revealed. There she takes Elmer to her private chapel, "an altar of grotesque humor or of madness" (EG, 184), where she performs a lewd and debased pseudo-religious service. Before her "gods" -- a degenerate assembly of pagan and Christian fertility deities -- Sharon petitions them to bless her anticipated sexual relationship with Elmer, which she has glorified to the level of a divine and spiritual thing. In this sense also Sharon





can be regarded as a victim of that same inability to distinguish physical from spiritual values which has been seen as the most fundamental deficiency of the corrupt world in which she and Elmer move. For the entire chapel service is perverse and sick, a monstrous parody of spirituality, enacted not in praise of God, but rather of herself. Appropriately, Elmer sees in the center of all the idols "a beautiful, hideous, intimidating and alluring statuette of a silver goddess with a triple crown and a face as thin and long and passionate as that of Sharon Falconer" (EG, 185). The insane ritual that follows revolves around a narcissistic worship of her physical beauty and culminates in her request that Elmer read to her the Song of Solomon, whereupon she completes the perverse and erotic spectacle by swooning into his arms in a fit of orgiastic ecstasy.

With Elmer as Sharon's assistant, all pretense of dignity is dropped from her evangelism; "Elmer managed her in just the soap-box denunciation of sin which had made Cecil shudder" (EG, 187). Now in his glory, he directs all aspects of Sharon's campaign, advertising her tours "in a manner befitting a circus, an Elks' convention, or a new messiah" (EG, 187). A press-agent is hired who bribes local church leaders with promises of increased congregations in return for their financial support. Even the "conversion" process itself is under Elmer's jurisdiction. No vulgarity is beyond him if it will succeed in swaying the crowds. Hymns are written as college yells, Elmer directing them like a cheer-leader and seeing that "the real purpose of singing was to lead the audience to a state of mind where they would do as they were told" (EG, 194). Fake converts are hired to come forward to be "saved" as a stimulus to others. Sharon even pretends to heal the sick, though she actually has no belief in the efficacy of



faith-healing. In short, the entire procedure is a cynically-executed psychological manipulation of pathetic multitudes who in their desperation will turn anywhere for spiritual inspiration in an environment where all vestiges of spirituality are dead. Notably, the public's response to these methods is one of enormous enthusiasm, once again attesting to the extent of their blindness and gullibility. As would be expected Elmer is, like all Lewis' leaders, contemptuous of his audiences and "could not consider the converts human. Sometimes when he was out in the audience, playing the bullying hero that Judson Roberts had once played with him, he looked up at the platform, where a row of men under conviction knelt with their arms on chairs and their broad butts toward the crowd, and he wanted to snicker and wield a small plank" (EG, 196).

Elmer's relationship with Sharon reveals the extent to which they themselves have been rendered spiritually sterile by their common lust for power. Though claiming to love each other, such is not in fact the case. For despite Elmer's declaration that he loves and worships her, Lewis hints that a battle between the two leaders is raging beneath the surface; each in fact is vying for control over the other. At one point, Sharon asks Elmer "'Oh, you will serve me -- won't you?'" (EG, 183) to which Elmer replies in the affirmative; immediately after, however, he slyly suggests to her that "'you need comforting, maybe you need bossing, when I get over being scared of you'" (EG, 183). Feeling an intense sense of competition with her, he is angered at the thought of his subservient role as her assistant. Although happier than he has ever been -- "he had everything; his girl, his work, his fame, his power over people" (EG, 203) -- he contemplates usurping her, and imagines "a day when he would marry Sharon, supercede her as leader -- letting her preach now



and then as a feature -- and become one of the great evangelists of the land" (EG, 203). As the desire for power becomes all-consuming, the possibility of genuine love is destroyed, Lewis indicating again how his leaders are themselves victimized by their own debased aspirations.

Sharon's death is appropriate, in that her temple, the symbol of her pride, proves to be the instrument of her destruction. With the temple's construction, Sharon's vanity has become uncontrollable; now obsessed with the desire for glory she begins to imagine herself as a new messiah, remarking to Elmer on one occasion that "who knows? the next Messiah might be a woman, and that woman might now be on earth, just realizing her divinity" (EG, 210). When the fire breaks out she refuses to leave, and her ensuing suicide -- born of a perverse desire to achieve the glory of martyrdom but lacking utterly any sense of Christian humility -- is final proof that her destruction culminates a career of insane and depraved megalomania.

Following her death, Elmer drifts somewhat aimlessly, indulging himself in the nonsense of "New Thought". On one occasion, speaking in Zenith, a speech he gives is heard and appreciated by Wesley Toomis, a Bishop in the Methodist Church and a person of some repute in the community. Toomis is clearly a subaltern of the religious establishment, occupying a position much as did Babbitt in the financial world. He lives in an area of Zenith "much favored by the next-to-the-best surgeons, lawyers, real estate dealers, and hardware wholesalers" (EG, 245). The two men soon become close, Elmer seeing in the other man an opportunity for personal advancement. Accordingly, he joins the Methodists, though with some disgust at having to start once again at the "bottom" of this





institution. Ironically, he regards his first church in the tiny community of Banjo Crossing not with Christian humility at the prospect of doing God's work, but "with the mystic pride of ownership. It was all his; his own; and as such it was all beautiful" (EG, 257-258).

Here his experiences are essentially the same as when he was a student-preacher for the Baptists; again he meets and infatuates a woman as gullible and meekly submissive as was the hapless Lulu; again he appears to a similarly dull-witted congregation as wise and profound, and is accepted enthusiastically by them; most importantly, he feels again the thrill of his power over others. They "were his regiment, and he the colonel; his ship's crew, and he the skipper; his patients, and he the loyal physician" (EG, 264). Nor has his cynicism abated in any way, and he gloats that "he had them", Lewis adding that "it had been fun to watch the old fanatics. . .come under the spell and admit his power" (EG, 268).

As before, Lewis must remind us that Elmer is far from unique. Accordingly, at the Methodist conference, Elmer encounters established leaders of the church, who "believed that the Lord rules everything, but that it was only friendly to help him out; and that the enrollment of political allies helped almost as much as prayer in becoming known as suitable material for lucrative pastorates" (EG, 289). The conference, in no way a seminar of spiritually-concerned men, is merely an intense, competitive struggle for more prestigious positions on the part of a group of opportunists equally as ambitious as Elmer. As religion has become a mere business, so his fellow-ministers "looked like a group of prosperous and active business men" (EG, 312), which they in fact are. Thus when Elmer sees that in order to succeed he must regard his colleagues as rivals with whom he is in competition for increased congregations



and more prestigious positions, it is plain from what Lewis has told us of his fellow-ministers that Elmer is basically correct in his evaluation of them.

To further his rise in society Elmer joins clubs and organizations which will "enable him to meet the more enterprising and solid men of affairs" (EG, 293). He enters the political arena, campaigning for a candidate whom he believes will win, though detesting the man personally. When the man does win, Elmer similarly wins in prestige, and is largely for this reason alone appointed to a large church in Zenith. There Elmer meets a trustee of the church, the cynical lawyer T. J. Rigg, who, like Elmer, is under no delusions regarding the piety of ministers or the spiritual worth of religion. As Rigg remarks, "'we believe religion is a fine thing to keep people in order -- they think of higher things instead of all these strikes and big wages and the kind of hell-raising that's throwing the industrial system all out of kilter'" (EG, 302). To Rigg and the other leaders of society, religion exists merely to preserve and perpetuate the docility of the masses. Clearly a leader, Rigg serves the function of Elmer's "mentor", a perverse and evil equivalent of Gottlieb. As Gottlieb was primarily responsible for Martin's development, so Rigg is important in teaching Elmer more refined hypocrisies. Older and more shrewd, he schools Elmer in methods that will best enable him to rise within the religious establishment. For example, when Elmer is elected to the Rotary Club, he initially believes as had Babbitt that he has reached a pinnacle of prestige. Importantly, Rigg informs him that such is not the case, pointing out that "'there's one thing you're neglecting: the really big boys with the long pockets'" (EG, 346). Rigg shows Elmer that other, more powerful men are more worth cultivating,



men cynically aware that the Rotarians' cant about "service" is bunk, and, getting Elmer a membership in the prestigious local country club, convinces him that his former Rotarian friends "'haven't got the class of these really Big Boys'" (EG, 349). Thus, while the minion Babbitt had regarded his identification with Rotary as an end in itself, Elmer, through Rigg, comes to see it merely as a stepping-stone to greater power.

In his new position, Elmer meets other social leaders such as Col. Snow, who appeared briefly in Babbitt; the two men immediately see and respect each other as leaders: "Elmer and the Colonel recognized in each other an enterprising boldness" (EG, 330). At the country club, he encounters another leader in William Dollinger Styles, who frankly equates their respective positions in life, referring to Elmer and himself as men who "'make decisions that guide the common people, you religiously and me commercially'" (EG, 348). Now the smell of power becomes overwhelming, so close is he to the pinnacle of society: "Elmer drew a youthful, passionate, shuddering breath at being so nearly in communion with the powers that governed Zenith and thought For Zenith, that governed America and thought for it" (EG, 349).

Elmer's crusade against "vice" proves to be an excellent means of increasing the size of his congregation and drawing public attention to himself. Rigg comments acutely that "'It really is good stuff, this vice-crusading. Oh, I don't suppose it makes the slightest difference in the amount of vice -- and I don't know that it ought to make any. Got to give fellows that haven't our advantages some chance to let off steam. But it does get the church a lot of attention'" (EG, 336). Though Rigg is correct, the crusade also serves quite another purpose, and one more important than the mere bringing of publicity to the church.





For the "vices" Elmer attacks -- drinking, gambling and prostitution -- are seen by Lewis not as important moral issues but rather as incidental human excesses of a relatively inconsequential nature. In this spiritually-deprived age, however, the public, lacking a proper sense of good or evil, is very receptive to anything which the leaders wish them to regard as such. By drawing attention to these comparatively unimportant social concerns, Elmer detracts the public's attention away from a possible awareness of and dissatisfaction with the general state of society. Hence, he is doing the leaders of society an important service, for the public, saturated with these actually inconsequential "evils", is led to overlook the greater evils perpetrated by the leaders themselves. In his **vice-crusading**, then, Elmer can certainly be said to have achieved the status of leader, for he is in fact cynically working with the financial titans of the community for their mutual benefit. Nor, as a leader himself, does he intend to antagonize those men actually responsible for the vices he plans to expose; when Rigg cautions him as to this, Elmer replies that he merely intends to "'pick out some of the smaller fellows that make their own booze and haven't got any police protection'" (EG, 338).

As Elmer rises in status and power, there appears to be no stopping him. He speaks on the radio, goes on lecture-tours, even travels to Europe and preaches to an audience as enthusiastic as any he has encountered in America. The entire world, it would appear, has become spiritually depraved, and it is no wonder that, meeting Jim Lefferts again, Lewis should describe him as "a man discouraged" (EG, 385) by what Elmer and the world have become.

On the European tour Elmer meets J. E. North, "the renowned vice-



slayer" (EG, 392) who invites him to speak on his association's behalf. Here Elmer envisages a master-plan to combine all such organizations under his wing. Much like Tubbs in Arrowsmith, Elmer imagines combining "in one association all the moral organizations in America -- perhaps, later, in the entire world. He would be the executive of that combination; he would be the super-president of the United States, and some day the dictator of the world" (EG, 393). Although expressed somewhat facetiously, Lewis does not find Elmer's lust for limitless power merely laughable. Though his plan is ludicrous and impossible, Lewis fears even the desire in men like Elmer to aspire to such impossible heights, for in their overwhelming ambition lies their evil effect on society. Elmer's desire "to dictate what a whole nation should wear and eat and say and think" (EG, 394) would involve a total suppression of individuality, and every act directed to this end whittles away at that potential for such individuality which Lewis believed to be so necessary if one's life was to be at all vital and meaningful.

The final scene in the novel testifies to Lewis' pessimism regarding the state of society in general. Following an affair Elmer has had with his secretary, he is blackmailed by the woman and her husband. Though his powerful friends deal effectively with the blackmailers, running them out of town, the story leaks to the press and Zenith is made aware of Elmer's immorality. Quickly, apologies are extracted from the newspapers, but Elmer still worries over the public's possible rejection of him and the consequent ruin of his career. As it stands, however, Elmer need have no fears, for his gullible congregation, blindly and pathetically cheering their leader as he steps up to the pulpit, wishes only to believe the best about him, indicating that even when faced with the



truth, their ability to perceive it is negligible. Thus, although Elmer has not yet become the "Warwick of America, the man behind the throne, the man who would send for presidents, of whatever party, and give orders" (EG, 394), there is every possibility of his doing so in a world which unthinkingly allows him to aspire to such heights.

As has been mentioned, though the book is deeply pessimistic, Lewis does offer the isolated voices of Jim Lefferts, Pengilly and McGarry in opposition, and, though they tend to be drowned by the masses' thunderous applause of Elmer at the novel's close, such figures do represent an alternative to the extensive corruption and spiritual blindness in society, an alternative which appears with greater conviction in the subsequent Dodsworth. Thoroughly bleak and pessimistic though the book may be, Elmer Gantry does not present Lewis' vision of man and society in its entirety, as the ensuing chapter will illustrate.





## VI

### DODSWORTH: A FURTHER EXAMINATION OF INDIVIDUALITY

When Dodsworth appeared in 1929, many critics found the novel comparatively bland, ineffective and unconvincing. Robert Cantwell dismissed it contemptuously as a minor work, and asked in bewilderment how, after *Babbitt*, "could he have drawn so unrealistic a figure of a millionaire as *Dodsworth*."<sup>1</sup> Nor was E. M. Forster impressed; Lewis had clearly declined, he thought, to a level in Dodsworth where "the talk is rhetoric, the slang tired, the pictures blurred."<sup>2</sup> Even the previously faithful Mencken concurred as to its inferiority, conceding that the novel "has faults so obvious that they stand out like sore thumbs, and so gross that they must cause even the most faithful partisan to cough sadly behind his hand."<sup>3</sup> Taking particular exception to the presentation of the novel's two principal characters Fran and Sam *Dodsworth*, Mencken observed that Lewis had failed to "account" for Fran's personality; "her adulteries, like the social pushing that inspires them, seem gratuitous and senseless."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the portrayal of Sam was inconsistent; "Lewis first shows that he is intelligent, and then pictures him playing the complete fool."<sup>5</sup> Only the book's obviously satiric passages were of worth, in his opinion.

Mencken's views are worth noting, for other critics have shown a general agreement with his assessment.<sup>6</sup> It can be seen that what Mencken actually deplored about Dodsworth was the novel's comparative lack of satire and social criticism which had been so evident in the previous



novels. However, this negative reaction to the book rested on an assumption that Lewis was in the main limited to and capable only of satire; for him to write successfully from a basically realistic perspective was, so the corollary ran, impossible. As a result, since satire usually involves an over-simplification of character and situation to achieve its effect, the very complexity of the principal character Samuel Dodsworth, which unquestionably dampened his effectiveness as a satiric figure, was seen by Mencken as a defect to the novel itself. In short, rather than approach Dodsworth as the predominantly realistic work which it in fact is, Mencken proceeded to base his criticism of the book on an assumption alien to that upon which it was written; hence, he could only see it as poor satire, much as Frederick Hoffman had viewed Babbitt.

In fact, Dodsworth is only incidentally satiric. Here Lewis' main intent is to describe as realistically as possible the situation of his hero, a middle-aged man confronted with the realization of his limited and unsatisfying life. Though extensively confined by his environment, Sam possesses in spite of his deficiencies a core of genuine individuality, a basic independence of spirit which complicates him as a character and clearly distinguishes him from the mass of spiritless conformists such as Babbitt who had been viewed satirically. Lewis informs us at the outset that Sam was "not a Babbitt, not a Rotarian, not an Elk, not a deacon. He rarely shouted, never slapped people on the back, and he had attended only six baseball games since 1900. He knew, and thoroughly, the Babbitts and baseball fans, but only in business."<sup>7</sup>

Sam can be distinguished from Babbitt in numerous other ways as well. First, he possesses throughout the novel a basic belief in himself and in the value of his personal aspirations which, although



severely shaken, cannot be utterly stifled. In addition, he is an idealist, a creator and an innovator, rather than a mere money-making social parasite as was Babbitt. At various points in the novel he articulates a belief in the value of building, be it an automobile, a camper-trailer or a housing development; this creative aspect of Dodsworth, as Michael Millgate observed, best separates him from the Babbitts, for in this novel "we are no longer in the petty-business world but in a world of big business, with a hero who is primarily an inventor, a creator, and only secondarily a businessman."<sup>8</sup> Finally, because of his basic individuality and possession of personal convictions, Sam has never accepted society's values in their entirety. Unlike Babbitt, who worshipped all the status-symbols of his milieu, be they wealth or his various possessions, for Sam such accoutrements exist as mere incidentals, extrinsic to the attainment of his idealistic aspirations. From his youth, he has viewed the design of automobiles idealistically rather than as a means of making money; "he dreamed of motors like thunderbolts as poets less modern than himself might dream of stars and roses and nymphs by a pool" (D, 18). The wealth he has amassed is viewed by him as merely an incidental bi-product of his goal in life; though intimate with the intricacies of finance, Sam is involved with such matters only because such involvement serves as a means toward the attainment of his goal. For Babbitt, money was an end in itself; for Sam, it is merely a means whereby his higher purpose, the building and design of motorcars, can be furthered.

Despite his possession of these distinctive qualities, Sam is in middle-age far from a fulfilled human being. Two major factors have





contributed to render him vaguely frustrated and dimly aware that his life is not what it might have been. First, despite his ostensible success, Sam has ironically been trapped by attention to activities that have proceeded from the very commitment which originally gave his life meaning. Whereas the young Sam longed idealistically to design and create autos, an older Sam finds that over the years he has become increasingly preoccupied with the necessity of selling them, to the point where his original goal has been replaced with essentially uncreative and burdensome activities. Lewis makes an important distinction here between Sam's original goal and his present duties, stressing throughout that it is not the design or creation of autos that has had a debilitating effect on Sam, but rather the necessity of having to sell that which he has produced; his immersion in this purely materialistic field of endeavour is mainly responsible for his feeling of dissatisfaction. Over the years, increasing amounts of Sam's time and energy have been spent in the interests of this secondary purpose to the point where his original goal has become subordinate in importance. Without realizing it, he has gradually become part of an economic system beyond his control and forced into the role of businessman, one in which he is frustrated and unhappy.

The second factor responsible for dimming Dodsworth's original self-confidence and sense of purpose is his spoiled and selfish wife Fran. As the demands of his business have forced him to adapt his working energies to the economic scheme of things, so Fran represents the pressure to conform to socially respectable standards on a domestic level. The complete opposite of Martin's Leora, Fran attempts throughout the novel to impose the conventions of society on Sam. Deeply devoted to her,



Sam is blinded by her facade of sophistication to the fact of her essential emptiness. As he adores her, so he humbly accepts her opinion of him as a provincial and vulgar philistine, failing to see that he possesses genuine worth, that his goal of auto-design has been legitimate and worthy of respect. Regarding him as an uncultured lout, Fran never misses the opportunity to make him feel like one; "the easy self-confidence which weeks of industrial triumphs had built up in him she could flatten in five seconds" (D, 29).

Though petty, selfish and unfeeling, Fran is no mere monster; as she mirrors the values of society, so does she also embody much of its superficial glitter and appeal. Captivated by her elegance and beauty, Sam has foolishly come to regard her as a virtual oracle on matters pertaining to social behaviour and societal values. Ironically, he is quite correct in equating Fran's values with those of society, but infatuation with her prevents him from seeing through to the essential emptiness of both. At the same time, it should be noted that Sam is not entirely to blame for the high regard in which he holds Fran. For in fact she claims to desire just that life of freedom and independence which Sam realizes has been denied him. Though her claim is hypocritical, it has convinced him that she is individualistic, and that by following her advice a more enriched existence will be opened to him. Even during their courtship she professed a wish to lead a distinct and exciting existence, telling him "'I want the whole world, not just Zenith! I don't want to be a good wife and mother and play cribbage prettily! I want splendor! Great horizons'" (D, 13-14). Years later, when appealing to him to travel to Europe, she does so on the basis of their need to



escape the humdrum and routine existence of Zenith which she likens to that of "'a pair of old horses on a treadmill'" (D, 36). Though Sam will eventually see that she has no real desire to enrich her life and merely conceives of Europe as a vehicle whereby her own social status may be raised, it is little wonder that he has been led to regard her with admiration in light of her convincing advocations of the free and independent life. In short, Sam, unlike Martin Arrowsmith, has been subtly pressured to conform to socially acceptable patterns of behaviour both on personal and impersonal levels, virtually without his awareness that such pressures have been exerted on him. On the one hand his wife attempts to dominate his leisure activity; on the other, demands of his business have gradually reduced his working life to a dull and enervating routine.

Sam first becomes aware of his entrapped state in life following his decision to sell out his business to the giant Unit Automotive Co., an act which forces him to consider how he intends to live in the future. His original dream having been taken out of his hands, he finds he is left with nothing meaningful to do; importantly, innate integrity prevents him from accepting the offer of his competitors to enter their ranks as a vice-president, for he sees that in doing so he would become enslaved to the massive corporation, existing for it solely to make money. Significantly, in Sam's rejection of the offer Lewis is able to indicate that as an individual he has no desire to be a leader of others, a manipulator of men. The president of the company, Alec Kynance, appeals to him on this very basis, assuming that Sam will "'be tickled to death at getting hooked up with a concern that can control the world-market one of these days -- regular empire, b' God'" (D, 25). The attempt to lure Sam with such appeals of vast wealth and power fails, because despite his position





in life Sam is no potential leader. If anything, his position at this point recalls Arrowsmith's when he was offered a future of power and prestige by Tubbs and Holabird. Just as Martin rejected them, so does Sam resist Kynance, seeing that in such a life lies the greatest slavery of all:

For the first time he admitted that if he went to the U.A.C., even as first vice-president, he would be nothing more than an office-boy. He could make no daring decisions by himself. They had taken from him the pride in pioneering which was one of his props in life -- and who They were, he didn't quite know. They were something more than just Alec Kynance and a few other officers of the U.A.C. They were part of a booming industrial flood which was sweeping over him. (D, 22)

This realization that to remain within the automotive industry would entail the sacrifice of what potential for freedom he still possesses enables Sam to resist the pressure put on him by the de-humanized Kynance, for whom "'work is a religion'" (D, 26), to become a subservient part of the gigantic economic machine.

Faced as he is with the need not only to escape but also to discover a new and different goal, he agrees to travel to Europe with Fran for an indefinite period. As has been the case in previous novels, Sam as an individual recognizes, if only dimly, that a physical escape from his society is necessary if a more fulfilling life is to be achieved. However, at this point in the book Sam's escape can be at best partial, for in the presence of Fran Lewis suggests that he is in fact still at the mercy of society in all its falseness. Though able to see the threat of the "booming industrial flood," he is as yet unaware that his wife also presents a threat to his individuality every bit as dangerously stultifying.

In the main, Sam's experience in Europe is a disillusioning one. Though his old values and beliefs in the supremacy of the American way of



life are thoroughly shaken, he is unable to discover a legitimate alternative in the society of Europe. To his dismay he finds expatriate Americans who are severely critical of their native land. Though they love much of America -- its landscape, scenery and vastness -- Sam is surprised to learn that few wish to return. In Europe, he is told, "'your neighbors don't spy on you and gossip and feel it's their business to tell you how to live'" (D, 94); nor in Europe, as one person puts it, are there "'morality hounds sneaking after me all the time'" (D, 95).

But more importantly, Sam is made to realize the extent of America's destructive effect on himself. In comparison with his European counterparts, he finds he is ignorant of world affairs, unversed in anything save business, and must admit that in his previously insulated environment he had smugly and wrongly "'felt that the entire world revolved around the General Offices of the Revelation Motor Company'" (D, 120). The effect of these embarrassing experiences, wherein he is made aware of his deficiencies as an American, is both detrimental and beneficial to his development. First, his awareness of his ignorance and lack of sophistication, insofar as it seems only to reinforce the opinion Fran has held of him for years, serves to convince him further that he is hopelessly "overgrown, clumsy, untutored" (D, 76). Accordingly, he is led to revere Fran falsely as comparatively astute and intellectual: "He felt that she was a scholar; he felt that he was untutored and rusty; he depended on her admiringly" (D, 107). This reliance on Fran is detrimental as it prevents him from recognizing that he possesses genuine virtues as well as flaws. However, in that he is made aware of America's deficiencies, the rude awakening he receives in Europe is beneficial, for he is resultingly better able to evaluate his native land more



accurately. This is evidenced when Sam returns alone to America for a class-reunion. Though initially nostalgic for America, upon his arrival he sees that he has been sentimentalizing. The chaotic din of New York appalls him, and he views it as "a city nervous as a thwarted woman" (D, 147). With him on the voyage home has been Ross Ireland, an international reporter whom Sam had met earlier in Paris, and himself an individual who earlier had had praise for what he considered to be American "vitality". Shortly after his arrival, Ireland rues his previous adulation after experiencing the chaos of New York and its effect on his old newspaper friends, and admits to Sam that his affirmation of a basic and thriving American individuality had been but a delusion. As he says, "'These lads that've stuck here in New York, they're so self-satisfied (like I was once!) that they don't care a hang for anything beyond the current price of gin! They don't know there is a Europe, beyond the Paris bars'" (D, 152). Ireland also feels dehumanized by the very force of America for which he had had praise: "'Honestly, I felt like a refugee driven by the Cossacks -- no, I didn't feel that human; I felt like I was one of a bunch of steers driven down the runway to the slaughterhouse. God, what a town! Luxury! Gold! Everything but self-respect and decency and privacy'" (D, 153).

As it is a strong society, America ironically crushes its individuals with the very momentum which proceeds from its strength. Sam realizes that Ireland has been correct in his assessment of the effects of American society on individual men. Looking about him at Grand Central Station, he compares it with Notre Dame Cathedral, an equally immense and imposing building, but one which did not demean individuals as this one appears to:





Why, he wondered, was it that the immensity of Notre Dame or St. Paul's did not dwarf and make ridiculous the figures of the worshippers as this vastness did the figures of travellers galloping to train-gates? Was it because the little people, dark and insignificant in the cathedrals, were yet dignified, self-possessed, seeking the ways of God, whereas here they were busy with the ludicrous activity of insects? (D, 154)

Sam reflects further that the railroad-station is in fact a type of perverse religious temple, built not in the name of any spiritual or aesthetic principle, but merely to glorify the "God of Speed", that feverish pace in American society which, proceeding from America's obsession with material production to the exclusion of all other concerns, reduces its citizens to mere economic units who have value only insofar as they contribute to this process of production. Importantly, as Sam looks down on the people in the station, he imagines them as being engaged in economic pursuits such as selling or stock-broking; their ability to engage in other, non-materialistic activities, has been denied them. More importantly, Sam also sees that he too has been victimized by this force, and must admit that "he was chained by every dollar he had made, every automobile he had manufactured -- they meant a duty to his caste. He was chained by every hour he had worked -- they had left him stiff, spiritually rheumatic" (D, 163).

During his return, Sam visits his friends and family and sees that their lives have been even more severely restricted than his own. His friend Tub Pearson, a person much like Babbitt in his insensitivity and banality, provides an excellent example of a basically decent man whose opportunity for meaningful growth has been stunted by his environment. Unlike Sam, Tub as a banker has throughout his life been totally immersed in the concerns of his materialistic society; never having been able to escape, never having had the opportunity to discover deeper values, he has



remained superficial and conforming, comfortably oblivious of his emptiness. When they meet, following their initial exchange of pleasantries, "they found that they had nothing else to say" (D, 168); a now-wiser Sam realizes that, as Tub has unthinkingly accepted American society all his life, he would never be able to sympathize with his new-found awareness of its deficiencies. Similarly, at his class-reunion, most of Sam's old classmates "had drifted from the cheery loafing and simple-hearted idealism of college days. . . . They were fathers and grandfathers, and most of them looked as though they overworked or overdrank. Not one of them had found life quite the amusing and triumphant adventure he had expected; and they came back wistfully, longing to recapture their credulous golden days" (D, 171). All have been reduced to some degree by their society. All have lost that lust for life, those ideals and aspirations which characterized them in their youth; in short, their individual selves have been suppressed by a world which places no value on individuality.

Nor have Sam's children escaped the effects of American society. His son Brent is completely materialistic and utterly lacking in meaningful ideals. Though Sam timidly advises him to enter into a field more creative and ultimately more rewarding than the bond business which Brent has expressed interest in -- "'I've always wanted to build things; to leave something besides a bank balance. Afraid you wouldn't be doing that, just selling bonds'" (D, 165) -- Brent is obviously unimpressed and Sam realizes sadly that his son is too thoroughly accepting of American materialism ever to be changed: "Sam sighed to himself that he had lost the boy forever" (D, 166). Nor is his daughter Emily different; totally preoccupied with social functions, she accepts her society's values in a similarly unquestioning manner, and passes this acceptance down to her



children, causing Sam to see that such conformity is largely self-perpetuating and that he is in part responsible for the sterile people his children have become.

Sam's European experiences have enabled him to view his old acquaintances with a new perspective and conclude that "none of his prosperous industrialized friends in Zenith were very much interested in anything whatever. They had cultivated caution until they had lost the power to be interested" (D, 180). The arts, politics, life in general, they have been trained to ignore in their pursuit of socially-acceptable goals such as money-making. Yet Sam cannot blame any of these victims. Much later, when in Europe observing a group of American tourists who in their vulgarity and crassness embody so much that is wrong with his native land, he realizes that "they were not altogether to blame. They were the products of Prohibition, mass production, and an education dominated by the beliefs that one goes to college to become acquainted with people who will later be useful in business" (D, 318).

Fortunately, Sam has himself escaped before it is too late, and recognizes the degree to which his life has been limited. However, though America misuses its strength to subject its population, reducing them in the process to a race of servile conformists, Europe is not to be preferred in its weakness and decadence. Though Europe appears initially to provide an atmosphere more conducive to the development of individuality, Sam encounters throughout Europe few persons whom he can actually admire. Though its values are different from those in America, Sam soon sees that they are as capable of stifling a man's soul, and every bit as effectively; though its conventions and mores may differ, pressure to conform to them





is equally intense, the resulting loss of individuality just as prevalent. Although appreciative of its tradition and history, Sam finds much of Europe distasteful. Many of the people he meets -- both Europeans and expatriate Americans -- are snobbish and effete cultural dilettantes who rely on their class-status or superficially sophisticated mannerisms to carry them through life. At a dinner-party he surveys "twenty people, all nibbling so delicately at their salmon and at other people's reputations. No one seemed to have any vulgarly decided opinions" (D, 81-82), other than an unabashed contempt for an America which they can only construe as being vulgar, because declaration of such opinions might offend "important" people and in turn jeopardize their social positions. In short, Europeans are as rigidly bound to role-playing, as beholden to the opinions of their superiors, as are Americans. As a friend will later tell him, Europe exists on "a certainty of manners in an uncertainty of the future" (D, 162); placing emphasis on behaviour, European culture ignores and suppresses individuality as much as does America.

As would be expected, Fran accepts Europe enthusiastically and is able only to see and be impressed by the appearance of refinement and gentility, unaware that it is mere facade. Sam realizes that the Europe Fran subscribes to is as false an environment, if not moreso, than the America they have left, that the existence "into which Fran had led him was not the realization of the 'great life' for which he had yearned, but its very negation -- the bustle, the little snobberies, the cheap little titles, the cheap little patronage of 'art'" (D, 135). Whereas Fran regards their European acquaintances as "'the nicest and most amusing people'" (D, 138) Sam is aware of them accurately as merely "'a bunch of



wasters /who/ . . . dance and chatter and show off their clothes'" (D, 138).

Not having found in Europe the encouragement to human dignity and individuality he had expected, but aware now that American vulgarity and materialism is an inescapable fact, Sam finds himself in a quandary. On the one hand he views America, a parched spiritual wilderness, on the other a decadent and enervate Europe. What he has yet to see is that it is not only unnecessary but also detrimental to his development to try to "fit into" either society, be it European or American; no succour can ever be taken legitimately from any society, for all share the common tendency to stereotype individuals into conforming moulds. As in Arrowsmith, Lewis assumes that societies by definition are rigid and repressing. But here he has broadened his indictment of society to the point where all group values, regardless of geographical locale, are viewed with considerable suspicion as antagonistic to the individual's personal beliefs. <sup>9</sup> That Sam has become disillusioned with society in general, both European and American, is most important, for only when society is rejected is the individual able to turn inward and examine himself, not on society's terms, but on his own. However, Sam does not as yet possess the necessary self-confidence to re-assert his individuality in the face of such knowledge. Correspondingly, he turns to Fran, whose facade of sophistication he initially believes to offer a genuine alternative. As he looks to her as a source of refuge from his disillusionment so he fails to see that her behaviour typifies the very acceptance of society that is responsible for the human emptiness he has witnessed both in Europe and America. Sam's greatest struggle lies in his ability to discover that only when free both from society in general and Fran in particular is there hope for a reassertion of that basic



individuality which characterized him in his youth.

When first in Europe, made uncomfortably aware that a world existed of which he had been hitherto complacently unconscious, Sam had been understandably unsure of himself. Fran's seeming ability to manage with ease their new life together had led him to conclude that "she was better than he -- that slender, shining being. . . . She was a divine thing, while he was a clodhopper" (D, 57). However, it soon becomes apparent to him that they have travelled to Europe for entirely different reasons. Sam desires to utilize his new-found freedom meaningfully through extensive travel and possibly recapture some of the variety of life that he now sees was denied him in America. Fran, however, places value merely on the social life Europe offers, and Sam finds himself subjected to an endless round of dinners and cocktail-parties which he loathes. Though he wishes "to escape from the hotel-and-theater London of the tourist and see the authentic English" (D, 67) he dares not defy Fran, who considers such activities beneath her.

However gradually, Sam does begin to see through Fran; ironically, she herself forces this insight upon him. As he becomes increasingly contemptuous of her snobbish and unsubstantial friends, the trivial activities which she considers so meaningful and the general superficiality of the environment into which she has led him, so he is forced to conclude that, as she is readily accepted by this milieu, so must she be similarly unsubstantial. In addition, many of Fran's remarks expose her superficiality to him. During a quarrel she admits that she "'finds it rather more amusing to play with civilized people than to. . . go around gaping at ruins with a Baedeker'" (D, 195). Statements such as this cause Sam to see that to her "all 'culture' was interesting only as it adorned her





socially" (D, 114). As he realizes that she is in no way interested in enriching her experience of broadening her mind, as he sees that her only concern is "to keep herself fashionable in the eyes of the choice people who did not know she existed" (D, 115), so he is led to admit that she is childish, immature and empty. Even more important, however, is Sam's discovery that to Fran he exists merely as an attendant, a person to be bullied and patronized but not loved, a man to be used whenever convenient. When surrounded by admiring men, Sam does not exist for her; yet when the admirers tire of her she returns to him, incredibly expecting him to provide a source of unquestioning reassurance and comfort.

When it becomes obvious beyond all doubt that Fran has been having an affair during his absence in America, Sam can overlook no longer that "she was not in the least a mature and responsible woman, mother and wife of an administrator, but simply a clever child, with a child's confused self-dramatization. The discovery had dismayed him. Then it made him more tender. His other children, Brent and Emily, did not need him; his child Fran did need him. Something in life still needed him" (D, 192). Accordingly, he resolves to stay by her side and endure her insults, her affairs, and her utter selfishness, because, though able to see her for what she is, he is as yet unable to cast her off since he still believes she gives his life meaning, if only now in the capacity of her guardian. In reasoning thus, Sam has reached what might be termed a mid-point in his development. Not yet sure enough of himself to reject her and assert his own independence, he continues to identify the source of his life's meaning in her, despite the fact that he actually knows her to be unworthy as such a symbol. It will be noticed that



Sam's ability to respond in such a selfless way is in marked contrast with Arrowsmith's singularly selfish pursuit of his goal in life; if anything, Sam is too altruistic at this stage. Later, however, he will see that selflessness carried to this extreme is futile and self-destructive since it involves a negation of the individual's will and sense of purpose. In Lewis' opinion, the ideal lies somewhere in between the two extremes, as Sam will discover by the novel's close.

It could also be argued that in his worship of Fran Sam is not unlike Lewis' basically weak characters such as Babbitt who were able to derive a feeling of personal worth only through their identification with certain external status-symbols in society. Just as the Boosters' Club gave Babbitt the illusion of personal significance, since through his belonging to an institution larger than himself he foolishly believed himself to be enlarged as a human being, so Sam appears to identify with Fran for much the same reasons. The major difference, of course, is that Babbitt genuinely believed his status-symbols to have value; Sam, even as he decides to stay by Fran's side, realizes that she does not actually merit or deserve his attention. Thus, unlike Babbitt, his position is more apt to change as the worthlessness of Fran and the uselessness of his role as her protector become more obvious to him. For example, though they reunite, Sam cannot help but see Fran now as a "stranger" whom he has never really known. Soon after, Fran confesses to another affair, yet Sam "was astonished that he was not more astonished, shocked that he was not more shocked" (D, 196), since almost against his will he has come to expect little more from her. Though he tries to convince himself of her "beauty, gracefulness, wit, and her knowledge of European languages and customs" (D, 206) he is nevertheless forced to



admit that in fact she "had an unsurpassed show-window display but not much on the shelves inside" (D, 207).

Even with this knowledge, Sam does not possess as yet the necessary strength to sever their relationship. When Fran begs Sam not to divulge to her latest admirer the fact that she has become a grandmother, Sam sees that she is having yet another affair, and that if he is to retain even a vestige of self-respect he must "rebel against her -- or against his worship of her" (D, 260). Yet he cannot, and ironically it is Fran who leaves him. Nevertheless, their separation has a beneficial effect on Sam, in that it initiates a process of self-examination which will ultimately culminate in his final realization that she has had a most destructive and debilitating effect on him. Earlier, Sam had wondered from time to time if, in spite of Fran's contempt for his "philistinism", he had nevertheless done something meaningful in life in creating automobiles. On one occasion, while contemplating a cathedral, he "felt, dimly and disconnectedly, that he too had done things with his hands; that the motor car was no contemptible creation; that he was nearer to the forgotten, the anonymous and merry and vulgar artisans who had created this somber epic of stone" (D, 133) than are any of Fran's acquaintances. Some time later, he wonders (again dimly) "was it possible that in some involved, unelucidated way, he himself was a savant in fields not admitted by the academicians as scholarship" (D, 229). Similarly, he begins to see himself as "possibly an artist? He had created something" (D, 229). Importantly, prior to the point when he and Fran separate, these thoughts only appeared occasionally in his mind; when they did appear, whatever self-confidence they might have inspired in him was subsequently squelched by Fran's contempt for him. However, with no Fran to drain





him of self-respect, Sam is at last free to assess himself; as a result, his self-confidence grows. After a period of despair following Fran's departure, Sam himself has a brief affair with a young European girl who "so assured him that he was large and powerful and real and that she preferred him to all of the limp poetasters about the place, that he was warmed by her companionship" (D, 300). Another source of rejuvenation comes from Ross Ireland whom Sam meets again. Having travelled extensively as a reporter, Ross rekindles Sam's original desire to travel freely through Europe; the two go on a walking-tour together during which Sam feels for the first time truly free to indulge the desire for fresh experience that has so long been denied him. Later, Ross asks Sam to accompany him to the Orient, but Sam is not able to discard the belief that he must remain near Fran as a source of protection should she require his services, and he declines. Not quite strong enough to act in a truly independent way, Sam needs another woman to provide that final rejuvenation to his damaged pride. Earlier, when in despair, the thought had occurred to Sam that, were he to meet a woman who would encourage him and reassure him in his goals, he might be able to escape Fran's destructive influence. Such a woman does appear in the person of Edith Cortright who provides him with assurance, encouragement and ultimately love. Having met Edith previously, Sam had been struck by the true sophistication she displayed in comparison with the flashy but unsubstantial Fran. Meeting her after the dissolution of his marriage, he is more than convinced that she is a person of true substance.

As has been mentioned, one of Lewis' purposes in Dodsworth was to examine an individual who finds his life's ambition has been achieved and then taken away from him, thus forcing him either to atrophy or to



choose a new goal. Dodsworth, as a person of ideals, has contemplated such new endeavours, be it the development of camper-trailers or the creation of new and original housing developments. Naturally, Fran had no use for his embryonic ideas and disparaged them. However, in Edith Cortright he finds no such discouragement. On the contrary, Edith proceeds to stimulate further Sam's belief in himself and in the validity of his as yet undeveloped aspirations. As such, she is not unlike Leora Arrowsmith in that both women serve to provide encouragement to their men. In itself, this might imply that Lewis could only conceive favorably of women insofar as they subordinated their desires to those of their husbands. However, Edith is far from a meek or submissive woman, and much more a distinct personality in her own right than was Leora. Where Leora's principal virtue lay in her ability to be "cheerfully non-existent", Edith is a much stronger figure who herself possesses distinct ideals and values. For example, she shows genuine interest in Sam's proposed ideas and in turn proposes several of her own. As she listens to his "fantastic, probably practical plans", "she was amused by them, suggested improvements, and Sam was lustily content" (D, 339).

Sam and Edith grow close, and are genuinely happy together; with her "he felt curiously free" (D, 338). However, when Fran is rejected by her lover's family for being (rather appropriately) too dubious in her status as a "divorcee" to qualify as a member of their aristocratic family, Sam unreasonably honours her request to return to her. However, this last link with his past submissiveness is soon overcome; seeing that she is unchanged, as foolishly snobbish and as superficial as ever, he returns to Edith on the next boat, secure at last in his belief in himself, his values and his new goals. The novel



ends with Edith and Sam bound for America to implement one of their proposed enterprises. Though the break with Fran has been difficult to achieve, the ending is clearly one of Lewis' most optimistic for in it the belief in the ability of the individual to prevail in spite of these odds has been affirmed.

In conclusion, it would appear that Dooley is indeed correct in saying that the "negative" Lewis as seen by Schorer and others is in no way the true or final one; "if he apotheosized anything, it was the American tradition of freedom and dissent,"<sup>10</sup> as seen here in Sam's final liberation from wife and society. Though Sam's particular interests and aspirations, as they are less romantic, do not stimulate our imaginations as readily as did those of Arrowsmith, they are nevertheless equally legitimate goals, containing that same practically-oriented idealism which had characterized Martin's scientific research.

Both Sam and Martin have obvious personality deficiencies; as such, they become more believable as characters. But Lewis' portrayal of Sam is if anything more credible. Previously, it was mentioned that Lewis had shown in Arrowsmith a man whose personal integrity, it seemed, depended in part on his sacrifice of consideration for the feelings of others; as such, he was difficult to sympathize and identify with. Furthermore, as several critics observed, insofar as Martin was both sensitive to his calling but insensitive to others, he was morally "lopsided" and somewhat unrealistic as a character. In Dodsworth we are presented with a different type of individual, a man who possesses Martin's dedication and integrity yet is consistently decent as well. Though both Martin and Sam are admirable, Sam, in that he is morally





the better man, makes Lewis' concept of true individuality somehow easier to accept, the author having responded to the doubt that arose from the thesis of Arrowsmith by presenting a true individual whose success in life does not entail the sacrifice of his ethical sensibilities. Furthermore, Arrowsmith's total isolation from society, though consistent with the progress of the book, had been regarded by Hicks as too singular a conclusion to be considered as providing a satisfactory resolution to the plight of individuals in general. Whatever the merits of this evaluation, it is plain that no such charge can be laid against the ending of Dodsworth, for here the hero's attainment of his goal, though distinctly of his own choosing, does not involve that total renunciation of society which Arrowsmith had seemed to imply was necessary. As a result, the difficulties that arose in Arrowsmith have been resolved, Lewis showing us through Sam Dodsworth that one need not necessarily be insensitive to the feelings of others, nor need he renounce the world, in the process of maintaining personal integrity.

With Dodsworth Lewis' picture of society becomes complete, and as Dooley says it is a far from merely pessimistic one. The great mass of men -- the citizens of Gopher Prairie, Wheatsylvania, Nautilus and Zenith -- accept unthinkingly the values of the society which surround them. Some men are able to utilize the masses' gullibility to rise within the system, but lose all humanity in the process. A few in society, the Carol Kennicotts, Paul Rieslings and Frank Shallards, attempt abortive rebellions but fail, having no real belief in themselves or in the validity of their aspirations, if any. Only a tiny minority are capable of achieving this necessary independence from society which in



turn enables them to aspire to personal goals that they, rather than others, have determined to be worthy. Often, this dedication entails the exclusion of other, humane considerations, but as seen in Dodsworth such is not invariably the case. This nucleus of true individuals Lewis admires and holds up against the wasteland of conformity, dehumanization and despair. Though deeply pessimistic as to the state of society in general, he clearly believed in the ability of such men of integrity to prevail.



## VII

### THE LATER NOVELS

In 1930, Sinclair Lewis received the Nobel Prize, an award which fittingly culminated a great decade of productivity. However, few realized at the time that the Prize would eventually be seen as an ironic epitaph to a man whose works after Dodsworth were never again to equal the stature and quality they had attained in the 1920's. Interestingly enough, Lewis himself seemed the first to realize that his most productive period had passed; in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he pointed almost bitterly to younger writers like Hemingway and Faulkner, who were "doing such passionate and authentic work that it makes me sick to see that I am a little too old to be one of them."<sup>1</sup> Various explanations have been offered in an attempt to establish the cause of Lewis' artistic decline on the basis of events in his personal life;<sup>2</sup> though plausible, these accounts overlook the change that took place in American society as a result of the Great Depression. As C. Carroll Hollis points out, Lewis' enormous success had in large part depended ironically on a society economically secure enough to be able to concern itself with those peripheral problems pertaining to social behaviour. However, in the 1930's these securities vanished: "when Gopher Prairie had its farms foreclosed, when Babbitts jumped out of office windows, . . . when Lowell Schmaltz became a bitter joke,"<sup>3</sup> America was forced to examine the more pressing and basic issues pertaining to human survival. Lewis, unable to adapt to the changes that had occurred in the world





around him, was now seen as superficial, remote from and irrelevant to the new age. Perhaps Grebstein puts it most accurately when he observes that "Lewis's best work had depended on the premiss that material prosperity without deeper values would engender spiritual poverty; suddenly he was confronted by a rich society which had grown poor overnight. He never got over the shock."<sup>4</sup>

However, it should not be concluded that Lewis' later works were simply the outdated products of a man too lazy to confront the issues of the day; even in the weakest novels can be found a genuine, if unsuccessful, attempt to respond to the times. Though bewildered by the now radically different social milieu, Lewis tried sincerely to re-affirm human values which he realized were in serious jeopardy. Unfortunately, the majority of these attempts were unsuccessful, for though they continued to affirm the value of individuality, they did so unconvincingly, especially when set against the actual world background.

In a sense, Lewis' technique defeated him. To affirm individuality, Lewis appears to have believed that it was necessary for his heroes to succeed; consequently, he had to ignore all those conditions about him which were destroying individuality with singular success. Hence, the Depression and its effects on men he barely touched on; World War II was scarcely mentioned; Hitler, with one notable exception, was frankly ignored. As a result, though his heroes did succeed, there was something empty and unconvincing about their success. Ann Vickers' triumphs in the midst of the human suffering around her became trite and irrelevant by comparison; similarly, Myron Weagle's "perfect hotel" that few in fact were sufficiently affluent to patronize was understandably regarded as a petty and insignificant achievement. Fortunately, a few of the later novels confronted



reality more directly. Those which did deal extensively with the destructive and corrupt power of the new society and its effects on men of integrity, such as It Can't Happen Here and Kingsblood Royal, are the strongest and best of Lewis' later period; those which avoided or ignored the presence of this corrupt and evil world, such as Prodigal Parents or Work of Art, are the weakest.

Lewis' first novel of the 1930's was Ann Vickers, 1933. The book was not generally well received, despite DeVoto's almost isolated belief that "it is Lewis writing, in matters of mere style, rather better than he ever wrote before."<sup>5</sup> Mencken dismissed it as "flubdub" and lamented that Lewis, having fallen in love with his heroine, had missed an excellent opportunity to satirize the "Improver" in Ann, which he believed could have been a most appropriate subject for his satiric skills.

The story concerns the stormy career of Ann Vickers, a woman of independent and liberal mind who moves through a variety of occupations as suffragette, social worker and penologist. Though successful in her work, like Una Golden before her Ann craves romantic fulfillment as well. After a series of unsatisfying love affairs and an unhappy marriage, she finally meets a man she believes to be her equal in independence and strength and marries him, at which point the story ends.

The novel is an excellent example of Lewis' inability to portray a successful individual in the midst of the more powerfully corrupt and destructive society of the 1930's. Superficially the book resembles those novels of the 1920's in its utilization of the same basic character-types which dominated the major work. Certainly Ann is meant to be thought of as a true individual, battling and transcending a society which desires as it did before to render its citizens abjectly servile. The



novel's strongest section, dealing with the conditions at the Copperhead Gap Penitentiary, presents in microcosm a picture of this society and its effects on the human soul as vivid as any in Lewis' fiction. There, the sole purpose of the prison is to reduce the inmates into a subhuman submissiveness, where beaten, destroyed men obey their masters "'like a licked dog.'"<sup>6</sup> As in the earlier novels, naive idealists are present, such as Ann's Communist friends who foolishly believe like Carol Kennicott that they alone possess the remedy which will cure society's ills. Leaders of this society also appear, men responsible for perpetuating the atrocious conditions Ann encounters both in and out of prison; be they owners of newspapers, anti-suffrage leaders, or prison officials, they share a common desire to preserve the status quo and in consequence, their own positions of power. Finally, the bulk of the book's characters accept this status quo; Ann encounters throughout her varied career a blind and uniform resistance to any form of social change.

Though conceptually similar to the major novels, Ann Vickers is a comparatively deficient work, for here Lewis is unable to embody in the central figure a clearly defined or consistent position in relation to society which might serve as an alternative to the social chaos and evil presented throughout the book; on the contrary, the heroine succumbs to this evil. Though Ann is, as Geismar says, "apparently intended to be the counterpart of his [Lewis'] most fully realized western man,"<sup>7</sup> her goals are vague, nebulous and not reinforced by any display of consistent integrity on her part. In this sense, she is not unlike Carol Kennicott. Yet importantly, Ann is not treated by Lewis as a Carol Kennicott, whose vagueness he had viewed as indicative of a fundamental immaturity on her part. Rather, Lewis himself appears in Ann Vickers





as unsure of human values as is his heroine. Like Ann, the novel itself lacks direction and is without that unity of purpose which so distinguished Arrowsmith and Dodsworth. Whereas there was no doubt as to the validity of Martin's or Sam's aspirations, the various programs to which Ann commits herself are viewed ambiguously, by Ann and Lewis together. For example, Ann's initial commitment to the cause of feminine suffrage is spoken of most favorably, Lewis informing us that her rejection of a conventional life and her desire "to learn with eyes and hands and nose, decidedly with nose, something of the agonized bodies of the people with whom she would have to deal" (AV, 103) is a sign of strength. At first, she finds the suffrage leader Mamie Bogardus to be "the bravest, the most honest, the kindest, and the most wistful woman alive" (AV, 107), with Lewis appearing to concur. Shortly after, however, Ann is seen denouncing the suffrage movement, again with Lewis' approval, as being too binding and restricting; similarly, the "wistful" Mamie is also criticized. Now Ann plans to "escape from the righteous bondage of the suffrage movement. The very virtuousness and self-sacrifice of Miss Bogardus, which made her expect equal virtue and sacrifice from others, was a worse tyranny than dungeons. In this world no one ought to be more than decently virtuous; it is too hard on the neighbors" (AV, 154-155). The confusion here arises from Lewis' change in attitude, rather than Ann's. Had he viewed Ann's initial commitment to the suffrage movement with irony, had he hinted at the outset that Ann would become disillusioned, that Mamie Bogardus was in fact too fanatical, then there would be no problem because we would have been given behind Ann a consistent authorial point of view. As it stands, Lewis alters his position as gratuitously as does his heroine, for he appears both to approve and disapprove of



suffrage and its leaders' dedication to the cause.

Such inexplicable shifts in the attitude of both heroine and author are numerous, to the point where the novel abounds in confusion. Though Ann's work in a settlement-house is initially praised by Lewis and seen as further evidence of her independence and strength of character, the value of social work is later questioned, Ann seeing it as "too parochial," the settlement-house as "nothing but a playground, much less well managed than the official city playgrounds" (AV, 236). Many other social issues are treated inconsistently as well. Lewis seems particularly indecisive and ambiguous regarding those characters who espouse the political left-wing. Ann's communist friend Pearl McKaig is condemned for holding views too radical, rigid and extreme. Yet later, at Copperhead Gap Ann meets Jessie Van Tuyl, who as a syndicalist certainly embodies a most radical philosophy; despite this, she is praised for her humanity, compassion and common sense.

However, if confused as to the validity of Ann's various goals and those of her friends, Lewis is even more bewildered when it comes to the person of Ann herself. Though he intends us to see her as a person of strength and integrity and respect her accordingly, it is obvious that in the final analysis the similarity between Ann and Lewis' earlier individuals is merely superficial. It will be recalled that in The Job Lewis had made much of Una Golden's desire to achieve both vocational and romantic fulfillment; this dual desire Ann also claims to share throughout the bulk of the book. Though Una's final success was somewhat unconvincing, in that novel Lewis had been at least consistent, for Una did not lose sight of her dual purpose in life, and retained her integrity because of this. With Ann Lewis is much less successful.



First, her attainment of sexual happiness entails the rejection of that basic belief in feminine equality which Lewis has presented to us as Ann's strongest and most praiseworthy characteristic. Secondly, in committing herself to the dubious Judge Barney Dolph, whom she knows "represented, then, precisely the cynical, vulgar dishonesty of public officials that she had been most passionately fighting" (AV, 470), Ann is also renouncing her humanitarian principles in the process. By all Ann's previous criteria (and, for that matter, Lewis') Barney is a typically corrupt leader of society; unscrupulous, selfish, venal, compromising in his ethics, he is a man Ann had previously despised, a man unbothered by the corruption in others or in himself; as Ann knows this, her commitment to him clearly is a sign of moral compromise on her part, obvious evidence of her capitulation to false values for which she earlier had nothing but scorn. In itself, there is nothing unrealistic in Ann's attraction for Barney, and a telling novel could have been built upon this sacrifice of her inner principles. However, Lewis makes no effort to suggest that such a sacrifice has taken place; on the contrary, he means the reader to see Ann's final position as further evidence of her strength, idealism and freedom from convention, and respect it accordingly. This, however, is difficult to do, for though she is surely as unconventional as was Arrowsmith (if not moreso), it is plain that Ann is merely self-indulgent where Martin had been dedicated. Her non-conformity can thus be sharply distinguished from Martin's, for it contains no idealistic end or purpose whatever; rather, it entails a negation of any such ideals.

As Ann replaces her original altruism with concern for herself alone, she grows less humane, regarding her Babbitt-like but well-meaning





husband with total indifference. Oblivious to his genuine pain when she tells him of her affair with Barney, she thinks of his very presence as tedious and bothersome. Ironically, she who had once pledged to "'go on scolding at slackness and cruelty'" (AV, 265) as long as it should exist, has herself become morally slack and cruel. Yet Lewis, far from chastising her for this reversal in position has nothing but tacit praise for what he expects us to see as her "independence of spirit;" accordingly, he ends the novel on a happy and uncritical note, without the slightest indication that Ann has given up a great deal more than she has gained.

But in reality Ann Vickers is one of Lewis' most pessimistic novels, despite the happy ending, for here there is no extollation of individuality, no convincing affirmation of human ideals or integrity. Though Ann escapes from a life of convention, she does not, as did Arrowsmith or Dodsworth, in the interests of attaining a higher goal, but merely in the cause of selfishness. As a result, though her final acts are meant to convince us of her individuality, they only assure us of her licentiousness; though intended to illustrate her new-found freedom, they merely reinforce us as to the extent of her final moral compromise. Martin and Sam had transcended the leaders of society, but Ann succumbs to one, and reveals both her own and Lewis' confused values in the process.

Though a generally disappointing book, Ann Vickers had contained certain scenes the vividness of which elevated it at times above the purely mediocre. Unfortunately no such passages can be found in the subsequent Work of Art, 1936, an account of a hotel-keeper's career which led Dooley to remark that "praise of the practical man is nothing



new for Lewis, but praise of dullness is."<sup>8</sup> Critics are almost universally negative in their assessment of the novel, deploring in particular the reversal in Lewis' position. For here the hero is no towering figure of imagination and strength but the plodding and pedestrian Myron Weagle, whose goal in life is merely to erect a "perfect hotel". F. I. Carpenter saw the novel as evidence of Lewis' confusion of false with meaningful idealism; here, "Lewis's hero, although embodying perfectly the ideal of Work, not only lacked, but positively condemned the ideal of Art, or creative idealism."<sup>9</sup> Hicks lamented the novel's utter irrelevance, and wondered how Lewis could have ignored the more important issues of the day; Work of Art, he thought, was simply old-fashioned.

As Carpenter suggests, the failure of the novel indeed stems from Lewis' now-obvious confusion of values. Here, the author has diluted his concept of what constitutes meaningful commitment in life to the point where it can now encompass virtually any human activity, no matter how petty or mundane. The novel traces the careers of two brothers, Myron and Ora Weagle, the one a dedicated hotelier, the other an insincere artist. Its purpose is to show that dedication to hotel-keeping is as worthy of respect as is an artist's commitment to his art, that running a hotel is on a par with artistic creation. Thus, we are told early in the book that Myron's mother understood people -- "the first requisite of hotel-keeping, as it is of law, medicine, or any other learned profession."<sup>10</sup> Throughout, Lewis inserts other such artificially-induced parallels, in an effort to convince us of his thesis. Myron keeps a note-book, as a poet might; also, when studying hotel inventory-lists, Lewis likens it to a poet perusing great literature. However, despite Lewis' insistence that Myron is creative, it is obvious that he is in



no way artistic in the true sense of the word. As best, his methods emulate those which an artist might employ, but even here his actions are at best only a parody of true artistic creativity, for they contain no awareness of a higher spiritual or even aesthetic reality which accompanies the act of artistic creation. In short, the very premiss of the book is unacceptable, for it attempts to deny the fact that qualitative distinctions can (and what is more important, should) be made in distinguishing various levels of human aspiration. Throughout, Lewis simply asserts in a variety of ways that Myron is a truly creative individual worthy of the same respect as Arrowsmith or Dodsworth, and expects us to accept his arguments without reservation. One of many devices Lewis uses in an attempt to generate this admiration for Myron is to contrast him with his brother Ora, a weak, unprincipled artistic dilettante, whose life is one continual compromise; last seen as a writer of pulp fiction, he at the novel's end is a success in the world's eyes, a failure in our own. Yet Ora fails in his capacity as a foil, because he is too extremely corrupt and venal to represent a genuinely convincing negative alternative to the life-style advanced by Myron. Lewis, however, uses Ora as the principal means of setting off Myron's virtues, ignoring at the same time the fact that truly dedicated artists can and do exist. The reason for this is of course obvious; were such a character to appear, Myron would then be seen to be found wanting by comparison. Though Myron is indisputably Ora's superior, Lewis tries to hide from us the fact that he is still unworthy of unqualified respect, his concept of art shallow, trite and petty, his role in life that of a mechanic rather than an artist, in no way a creator of new concepts and unities.

That Lewis believed Myron to be a true individual is also seen





in the similarity the novel bears in plot and theme to Arrowsmith. As a child, Myron is similarly inspired by an older man, following which he becomes as single-minded as was his fictional predecessor: "Not again, for more than an occasional hour did Myron aspire to anything save becoming a hotel-keeper" (WA, 72). In addition, he pursues his goal to the exclusion of concern for others, much like Martin; of Myron's wife, Lewis says that "being bored, she began to feel neglected -- as she probably was, though the driven Myron could not think what to do about it" (WA, 289). As well, throughout Myron is contrasted with a host of Babbitts and charlatans who serve to emphasize his strength, dedication and individuality. Finally, his ultimate position is one of isolation from society as was Martin's, he too having at last escaped from the influence of a world which threatens constantly to cheapen and vulgarize his perfect hotel in the interests of materialistic profit.

However, despite all these similarities, the resemblance is at best superficial, for Myron's choice of vocation is simply not lofty enough to elicit the respect for him that Lewis wishes us to have. For that matter, Lewis' choice of Myron's vocation is even unfortunate; in that the hotel-business must cater to the public if it is to survive, Myron becomes as much at the mercy of society as was Babbitt, without, it would appear, either his or Lewis' knowing it, and it is no wonder that Geismar was led accordingly to say of the book that it was "as though its author were setting up and then destroying his own framework of values"<sup>11</sup> in the process of writing it.

Though Myron Weagle is mundane, Fred Cornplow of Prodigal Parents, 1938, is an even less consequential figure, despite Lewis' concerted efforts to prove through him that the virtues of the common man are



indeed worthy of our respect and admiration. Prodigal Parents bears a superficial resemblance to Dodsworth, the hero as before desiring to escape through travel from a life he sees as restricted and unsatisfying. Like Sam, Fred is meant to be thought of as a true individual, a man of integrity and principle surrounded by people who possess none themselves. Various foils are drawn from Lewis' store of character-types in order to put Fred in the desired perspective. To emphasize his virtues, Lewis contrasts Fred with his selfish wife and spoiled children, an unscrupulous communist youth, a snobbish neighbour and a horde of shiftless and parasitic relatives, all of whom either ignore or take advantage of his generosity and kindness. Thus, the Communist Gene Silga is an aspiring leader-figure who lives to achieve "power and revenge; he was willing to risk death in the hope of smashing the entire democratic system and winding up with the factory workers dictatorially running the country, and himself running the workers."<sup>12</sup> Fred's wife Hazel is "fanatically devoted to possessions, to things" (PP, 86); his daughter Sara is not unlike Babbitt's daughter Verona, in her pretentious, snobbish behaviour; Fred's son Howard, though unconvincingly saved by Fred from a life of dissolution, is a rough equivalent of Lewis' lost rebel. All in all, the other characters commonly regard Fred as a mere convenience, an appliance to be used when needed but otherwise of no consequence. Bound as he is by the routine of his job and the demands of his family, Fred desires to escape to more meaningful activity in Europe, and does so. The trip both convinces him that he has led too restricted a life and liberates his inner, latent strength. Upon returning, he finds his son has made an alcoholic shambles of his life. Picking him out of the gutter and ridding himself of his freeloading cousins at the same time,



Fred decides to return to Europe, his new independence and strength now enabling him to appreciate the proposed trip more fully.

But Fred's possession of potential strength, the premiss upon which the novel rests, springs from nowhere; unlike Sam Dodsworth, Fred has been a philistine all his life. Sam's final position was credible, because he had manifested an independence of spirit in his past; though suppressed, his strength could at least logically be liberated. However, such is not the case with Fred, for nowhere in the novel is there evidence that he has been anything other than the "completely unimaginative small-city merchant" (PP, 323) everyone believes him to be; in fact, he is a man whose feeble powers of imagination can only be stirred when thinking about his business or when indulging in vague and sentimental escapist fantasies. Thus, when the once-meek Fred suddenly emerges as a strong figure the reader, unprepared for such a violent change in his character, is unconvinced.

As if aware that his heroes and their aspirations were becoming steadily more dubious, Lewis tended in the later novels to contrast them with more thoroughly evil antagonists whom he took pains to make as distasteful to the reader as possible, the better he thought to emphasize with feeble virtues the central characters possessed. For example, in Prodigal Parents the communist Gene Silga is portrayed as a person like Gantry, utterly unscrupulous and insincere; Fred's children are selfish, aimless and spoiled, and as such cannot be respected; his worthless cousins have no ambitions whatsoever. Only Fred has a tangible "goal", that of selling automobiles. Through these comparisons Lewis hoped that the true banality of Fred's goal would be hidden from our direct scrutiny. However, the result of this device is ironically the reverse of that





which Lewis intends, for Lewis' very lack of subtlety defeats him. Since the antagonists' vices are too exaggerated to be accepted, the discerning reader is actually forced to dismiss them as inadequate foils, and is led in turn to do precisely that which Lewis tried to keep us from doing, that is, view Fred by himself, without the presence of those unsavory contrast characters he has been forced to reject. In isolation, Fred emerges as a most deficient and limited person, utterly unworthy of the respect Lewis wishes us to give him. Possessing none of Dodsworth's imagination or creativity, he is, though slightly more broadminded, essentially a mere Babbitt; as such the novel becomes a clumsy attempt to affirm a mode of behaviour Lewis had earlier in his career satirized.

More importantly, Prodigal Parents illustrates once more the extent to which the later Lewis' values have become diluted. For here even that basic distinction Lewis had made in the major novels such as Dodsworth between creating as opposed to mere selling has been dulled to the point where neither Fred nor the author can "understand these superior people who considered trade mechanical and witless" (PP, 28). Accordingly, we are told that men like Fred account for "nearly all the medical researchers, the discoverers of better varieties of wheat, the poets, the builders, the singers, the captains of great ships" (PP, 100). Of course, Lewis' claims for Fred cannot be accepted, for in fact he possesses neither the researcher's idealism nor the builder's aspirations.

Though a poor novel, Prodigal Parents was very popular in its time, suggesting that it indeed contained something which the public (if not the critics) wished to read. Lloyd Morris has argued that its popularity stemmed from the reassurance it gave to the "Cornplows" of America, who in reading it saw a reaffirmation of bourgeois values in a



world that seemed determined to destroy them. Conservative in tone, the novel idealized the middle class as represented by Fred Cornplow. Reading the book, the public saw themselves in Fred as bastions of sanity and stability in a world of upheaval and change. Of course, Morris is careful to add that Lewis' thesis is in no way objective. Rather, the novel's antagonists "embody, in a kind of vacant caricature, most of the psychological hobgoblins which threaten the peace of several million old-fashioned Americans",<sup>13</sup> existing in the book merely "to incarnate the prejudices and fears of many million Cornplows."<sup>14</sup> Ironically, though Lewis in Prodigal Parents had at last presented that affirmative side of his nature which critics had long asked for, Morris concluded sadly that in doing so he had never been less of an artist.

Lewis' tendency to ignore reality becomes increasingly obvious in the 1930's, as Ann Vickers, Work of Art and Prodigal Parents demonstrate. Nevertheless, these novels had at least taken into account the existence of the real world. This is not the case with the subsequent Bethel Merriday, a story which deals with the rising career of a dedicated would-be actress, for here Lewis denies the relevance of reality completely by claiming that the life of the theatre is of greater importance. Given such a premiss, Hitler becomes inconsequential in comparison with a John Barrymore: Thus, as "Hitler bounded out of a Munich beer garden. . . perhaps it was as important that at this time John Barrymore was playing Hamlet and Pauline Lord Anna Christie and the Theatre Guild producing Back to Methuselah. . . /for/ They were so much less stagey."<sup>15</sup> Certainly it is quite legitimate for a writer to place art above the level of the temporal world; however, it is quite another matter to elevate Lewis' peculiar conception of the theatre above everyday reality. For the



author's concept of the drama is merely sentimental, immature and jejune, his claim that the theatre's purpose is to create "in a troubled world an illusion of strength and beauty and hope and honor and noble wrath. . . more real than reality" (BM, 87) disconcertingly mawkish.<sup>16</sup>

As the actors participate in a vocation whose function Lewis can only conceive in escapist terms, so he can only see them as "serious children; very childish, very serious, and apparently the only people still existent, in a world of Hitler and Buchmanism, who enjoyed life" (BM, 115). Notably, Lewis ignores the implications of his premiss, the result of which is to render Bethel Merriday one of his most intellectually confused works. For here the author of It Can't Happen Here appears to suggest that it is wise and prudent to ignore Hitler. Here the man who held American society up for inspection seems to be denying the very value of such an inspection. What Lewis wishes us to see as Bethel's total dedication to the theatre can only be interpreted as her oblivion to the real world; when she admits to herself that contemporary problems interest her not at all, that she is a "'selfish pig'" (BM, 48), it is indeed difficult to disagree with this personal assessment. Yet Lewis intends us to accept Bethel's egocentric and selfish value-system, for he has nothing but praise for her throughout the novel.

Whatever can be made of this book, it is plain that no one could possibly accept Lewis' thesis; the ostrich-like behaviour he extols throughout is in no way worthy of our serious attention. As a result, though this novel also parallels Arrowsmith in theme, is filled with in-authentic actors and actresses who contrast with the dedicated Bethel and reserves its praise for those alone who are committed sincerely to the acting profession, its utterly unconvincing account of what that





commitment entails makes Bethel Merriday by far one of Lewis' weakest later works.

In his discussion of Lewis, Geismar had observed in Bethel Merriday what he believed to be the culmination of a desire in the author to substitute for the real America with all its complex problems a fantastic realm of his own creation. Certainly Lewis' final two novels -- The God-Seeker, 1949, and World So Wide, 1951 -- substantiate Geismar's observation, for the first is an historical piece with remarkably little respect for history and the second a novel which, although again like Dodsworth, has been eviscerated to the point where virtually all human conflict has been removed. Both books consciously ignore the existence of America in mid-century; as Malcolm Cowley pointed out, they are mere echoes of a period long past, the characters sounding "like survivors from a vanished world, like people just emerging from orphanages and prisons where they had listened for thirty years to nothing but tape-recordings of Lewis novels."<sup>17</sup>

The God-Seeker concerns itself with the fortunes of a young carpenter named Aaron Gadd who, upon being inspired by an evangelist, travels west as a missionary to Christianize the natives; However, he soon becomes disillusioned with his religious ideals, seeing them as empty, and finally discovers his true social niche in life as a building contractor. As such, the novel is an attempt to affirm the value of sound, practical goals as opposed to vacuous spiritual ones. Yet here, as has been the case with so many of Lewis' later heroes, Aaron's final position does not stimulate our admiration, for he is merely a businessman, lacking in any creative or meaningfully idealistic impulse that originally characterized Lewis' true individuals.



Lewis attempts to ennoble Aaron's work as a contractor by portraying the function of a missionary as utterly lacking in value; thus, other missionaries are invariably portrayed either as hypocritical opportunists or wild-eyed fanatics. But, as in Prodigal Parents, Lewis' slant in the book is so one-sided that we fail to be convinced that Aaron's new life as a building contractor is really all that much to be preferred to his one one, as Lewis would have us believe.

World So Wide, though yet again resembling Dodsworth closely, is as Schorer has noticed also similar to Lewis' first work, Our Mr. Wrenn. The hero, Hayden Chart, leaves the stultifying, work-oriented environment of America for a life of hopeful enrichment in Europe. There he meets, as did Mr. Wrenn, an affected American poseur like Istra Nash named Olivia Lomond, to whom he is initially attracted. However, common sense prevails, as it did in Wrenn's case, and the pretentious Olivia is discarded for the honest and unaffected Roxanna Eldrich. Significantly, though the novel ends happily enough, Hayden and Roxanna marrying, Lewis fails to mention just what his hero now plans to do with his life; there is no hint that Hayden contemplates any goal in life, any higher aspirations other than marriage. In this sense World So Wide is unique, for even the poorest novels of the 1930's had contained a belief on Lewis' part in the importance of individual accomplishment. Though he had come to sentimentalize his heroes, dilute their values, and soften their situations of conflict, Lewis had throughout his career retained the one belief that a true individual's sense of purpose was a thing of value. But in World So Wide even this aspect of the individual's life is ignored; Hayden's work in America (he was an architect) is viewed only as degrading, and he is offered no alternative course of action. Here no human goals



are affirmed. By implication, they are even rejected, for although an aged Dodsworth reappears briefly in the book to tell Hayden not to remain too long in a Europe he will find stultifying, even Sam is now seen as an aimless and unhappy old man.

It would indeed be a mistake to make too much of the implied despair in World So Wide, a weak novel, badly thought out and quickly written. Though it represents Lewis at his most evasive, it in no way speaks for the later Lewis as a whole. Fortunately, there are several other novels written during his latter two decades which illustrate the author's continuing ability to face the world about him.

Though Lewis' tendency to fantasize has been seen as responsible for many weak and unconvincing novels, it is significant that this very tendency was instrumental in producing It Can't Happen Here, a work which demonstrates that fantasy can also be put to powerful use. Here Lewis employs fantasy, not as a means of escaping from reality, but much as did Huxley in Brave New World or Orwell in 1984, to portray a fictitious world of destructiveness and evil the roots of which can significantly be found in everyday reality. In this novel the process Lewis used in writing his sentimental, romantic and essentially escapist fiction has been reversed. Whereas works such as Prodigal Parents and Bethel Merriday (to name only two) had appeared realistic, they were only superficially so, Lewis taking care to edit from the text all those elements which might have complicated the simplistic and sentimental situations therein. As a result, instances of conflict were such that they could always be easily resolved, if unconvincingly; the happy endings similarly involved an ignoring on Lewis' part of logical conclusions which should have proceeded from his premisses. Thus, Fred Cornplow succeeded in life,





where logically he should have failed; Bethel Merriday should have been seen as a vapid egotist, where in fact she was praised. However, in It Can't Happen Here the unreal conditions in the novel lead us back to reality, insofar as they force the reader to examine an unpleasant truth about the actual world, that elements in existing society are amenable to the rise of a dictatorship in America. Thus, though the novel is based on a fictitious event (the triumph of Fascism in America) there is no attempt to ignore the logical implications that proceed from this setting; ironically, then, the book though a fantasy is one of the later Lewis' most honest social documents.

Significantly, all the personalities and social factors responsible for the triumph of this dictatorship are easily recognizable types which Lewis had portrayed previously in his major novels. Here the spiritually-destructive forces in society and the leaders behind these forces have been allowed to run rampant; as a result all those factors responsible for the suppression of individuality which Lewis had examined previously have become totally dominant. Life for the true individual, Doremus Jessup, becomes centred around one paramount concern: preserve his individuality or physically perish. Thus It Can't Happen Here merely extends Lewis' vision of man and society as it had appeared in the major novels; though expressed in extreme terms, it does not, as Grebstein observes, depict a world-view qualitatively different from that seen in Main Street, Babbitt or Elmer Gantry:

To put it simply, the rise of the Corpus in the United States in It Can't Happen Here is merely an extension of what Gopher Prairie felt about someone not joining in its boosting, or an enlargement of the Good Citizen's League in Babbitt, or an expansion of what the fundamentalist vigilantes did to Frank Shallard. Thus, the novel employs the same conflicts preponderant in Lewis's other books.<sup>18</sup>



As a result, the dictator Windrip and his allies are seen as social leaders much like Elmer Gantry, who have actualized their wildest dreams. As might be expected, Buzz Windrip is in many respects modelled on the character of Elmer Gantry. Both are motivated solely by a lust for power, and utilize similar methods to achieve it. Windrip's success in impressing his audiences rests on his ability to parrot all those meaningless cliches which he cunningly knows will produce from a public already indoctrinated to a great degree a desired, favorable response; as Lewis says, "he was an actor of genius"<sup>19</sup> who, posing as a common man of the people, convinces them that he is their saviour. Like Gantry, Windrip possesses allies whom he uses ruthlessly, such as the would-be demagogue Bishop Prang, another potential dictator who desired "one hundred and thirty million people to obey him, their Priest-King, implicitly in everything concerning their private morals, their public asseverations, how they might earn their livings, and what relationships they might have to other wage-earners" (ICHH, 42). Significantly, the weaker Prang is destroyed as soon as his usefulness is over. Windrip's assistant, Lee Sarason, is if anything less principled than his superior; as the intelligence behind Windrip, he later executes a coup d'etat and replaces him, Lewis suggesting as he did in Elmer Gantry that the struggle for power is self-destructive.

Importantly, Windrip's success is based on the actual readiness of the American public to be swayed by a demagogue. The mental rigidity, the intellectual impotence, the incipient racism and prejudice, the blind conservatism that Lewis believed were so prominent in the real America are the biggest contributing factors behind Windrip's rise to power. Notably, he is elected to office, and the ensuing events are as



much the fault of average Americans as they are the result of Windrip's political skills.

As Lewis' purpose is to awaken his readers to the imminent danger of a successful dictatorship in America, so he emphasizes those existing fascistic elements in actual American society early in the novel. At the local Rotary Club, Jessup hears a general advocate increased militarism and a D.A.R. speak on the need for more "discipline" in American life. Seeing the threat such attitudes pose to personal freedom, Jessup asks himself "'where in all history has there ever been a people so ripe for a dictatorship as ours'" (ICHH, 22). Nor is Jessup's family immune to fascistic thinking; his son Philip is viciously anti-Semitic; his stupid and gullible wife is impressed by Windrip's empty words, and remarks to Jessup "didn't Mr. Windrip speak beautifully about pure language, church attendance, low taxation, and the American flag" (ICHH, 354). Many of Jessup's friends as well express sympathy with Windrip's policies, and he finds himself virtually alone, surrounded by a world bent on destroying any and all instances of freedom and individuality.

Though Jessup himself possesses sufficient inner integrity to withstand the forces around him, Lewis is careful to show that this strength must develop. A small-town editor of a newspaper, Jessup's individuality has found little opportunity to vent itself; up to now he has not found in life a cause worth fighting for, a goal to commit himself to which would give his life meaning. Nevertheless, he is able to think for himself and act on the basis of his convictions when the need arises, as it does when Windrip comes to power. This ability to think and act independently is a quality which Lewis eventually advances as America's only hope, the only true opposition possible to totalitarianism of any kind.





As Jessup becomes increasingly aware of the threat to freedom which Windrip represents, both his resistance to fascism and his belief in the value of individuality grow more articulate. During the election campaign he speaks on behalf of Windrip's opponent; later, when Windrip is President, his excesses force Jessup to criticize him in his paper, overcoming that part of him which would weakly yield and submit to the dictator's power. In the course of the novel he moves from a somewhat timidly evasive position to one of actively fighting the new regime through an underground press; apprehended, he is jailed, tortured and threatened with death but his new-found strength cannot be subdued. Escaping to Canada, he begins to work on behalf of restoring freedom to America, having seen that the real enemy of human freedom was as much his own initial apathy as it was human intolerance and rigidity of mind: "'The tyranny of this dictatorship. . . /is/ the fault of Doremus Jessup! Of all the conscientious, respectable, lazy-minded Doremus Jessups who have let the demagogues wriggle in, without fierce enough protest'" (ICHH, 224). Jessup also comes to see that, in a strange way, Windrip's bombastic promises appeal to naive idealists, and he is led to suspect that such idealism is in fact a negative force at work in society: "'Is it just possible,' he sighed, 'that the most vigorous and boldest idealists have been the worst enemies of human progress instead of its greatest creators'" (ICHH, 141). As Carol Kennicott recognized that, in her own way, she was as uncompromising and rigid in her views as was the widow Bogart, so Jessup sees that the mental rigidity born of idealism is as dangerous as is the blind conservatism of those "who damn as 'dangerous agitators' any man who menaces their fortunes; who jump in their chairs at the sting of a gnat like Debs, and blandly swallow a camel like



Windrip" (ICHH, 141). Though suspicious of both approaches to life, Jessup is no mere cynic, and advances a belief in the value of individuality as the sole means of combatting the forces of social repression:

"More and more, as I think about history," he pondered, "I am convinced that everything that is worth while in the world has been accomplished by the free, inquiring, critical spirit, and that the preservation of this spirit is more important than any social system whatsoever. But the men of ritual and the men of barbarism are capable of shutting up the men of science and of silencing them forever." (ICHH, 433)

In this passage Lewis has stated as succinctly as anywhere in his fiction his belief in the value and importance of individuality in relation to the stultifying forces of society; as has been seen, though far from a purely optimistic view, Lewis clearly believed in the individual's ability to prevail, as evidenced by Jessup's final position in the novel. Huxley's *Savage* committed suicide in despair and Orwell's Winston Smith succumbed to Big Brother, but Doremus Jessup not only resists but triumphs, a stronger and wiser man at the novel's conclusion than he was at its outset. In this sense It Can't Happen Here contains Lewis's most affirmative single statement regarding human potential, for we are told explicitly that "a Doremus Jessup can never die" (ICHH, 458).

Contemporary critics were generally pleased with the novel, seeing it as a timely and necessary examination of current social issues. Hicks, writing shortly after its publication, thought it marked Lewis' return to relevance and commented that the book, "though in itself a good deal of a tract, gives reason to hope that Lewis will be restored to his eminence as a novelist."<sup>20</sup> Even R. P. Blackmur, though careful to note that the novel was the work of a "publicist in fiction," recognized its importance as a social document and acknowledged that it raised many important questions.<sup>21</sup>



Nevertheless, though It Can't Happen Here is intense, dramatic and exciting, it has deficiencies that ultimately relegate it to a level just below that of Lewis' major work. For example, as Dooley and others have seen, Lewis has taken no trouble to envisage a native fascist movement in America; rather, he has merely transposed elements of German Nazism upon an American framework. The only serious attempt to "Americanize" the Fascists occurs in Lewis' characterization of Windrip himself, whose public display of Rotarian heartiness and folksy rusticity reveals him to be a distinct American type. But Windrip's aides and assistants, his storm-troopers and concentration-camps, are mere carbon-copies of their German equivalents. For that matter, though Windrip himself may be distinct as a character, his rise to power is as close a parallel to that of Hitler as one could expect, even down to the writing of an American Mein Kampf which he entitles Zero Hour. Much of the novel's effect is thus dampened as a result of Lewis' unfortunately too-close reliance on the progress of historical German Fascism; the reader is forced to conclude that it could not happen here, at least not in the way Lewis has described.

Lewis' portrayal of the various fascists in the novel is also unfortunate. From the ruthless Windrip and unprincipled Sarason down through to the perverse Effingham Swan and the demented degenerate Shad Ledue, all echelons of the Windrip movement are described as uniformly inhuman. Lewis has taken such care to deny them any humanity whatever that they appear as mere monsters; primitive caricatures of pure immorality and cruelty, whose complete evil detracts from their effectiveness as realistic figures; as a result we remain unconvinced by their very excesses of brutality and cruelty.<sup>22</sup>







However, these defects, while detracting from the total importance and success of the book, do not utterly eclipse its essential message. It is made very clear that all those forces in society which Lewis had been exposing for years are powerfully prevalent in society; if not checked, they could triumph, and in so doing endanger the very existence of individual freedom in America. The only remedy lies in the cultivation of a tolerance on the part of society in general regarding the right of the individual to think as he wishes, pursue his own goals, abide by his own values, and ceaselessly question the authority of the status quo. Only then can American society become a viable and fertile domain.

Gideon Planish, 1943, marks Lewis' second attempt to investigate in detail the career and motives of another manipulator of the masses. Leaving his position at a small college to manage a series of bogus charitable institutions, Gideon Planish ultimately finds himself working for established social leaders as director of an ostensibly philanthropic organization which in fact is used by the leaders merely to further their own powerful positions. Suddenly he realizes that his superiors are evil and hypocritical, that the associations for which he has worked exist primarily to perpetuate themselves, the salaries of their employees and the power of their founders. However, though he desires to return to the more honest and legitimate life of the university he is unable to do so, his acquisitive and avaricious wife frankly refusing to oblige him. The novel ends with Gideon realizing that he has been trapped, ironically by his own success.

As might be expected, the novel is much like Elmer Gantry, insofar as it also is concerned with a man whose desire for self-advancement is unimpeded by moral scruples on his part. Elmer Gantry even makes a



brief appearance in the book, as if to remind the reader of the similarity between the two figures, who are indeed alike in many ways. Both are orators, capable of charging their empty utterances with a semblance of profundity; both have a consummate ambition in life to rise in society; most importantly, both are basically immoral and will resort to any means necessary to achieve power and prestige.

As Gideon is much like Elmer Gantry, so many of the characters with whom he comes in contact are similar to those found in the earlier work. Like Elmer, the young Gideon has a friend in Hatch Hewitt, who like Jim Lefferts before him tries unsuccessfully to inculcate in Gideon a sense of intellectual integrity. Eventually seeing Gideon for the opportunist he is, Hewitt gives him up in disgust and the two go their separate ways. Later, as an aspiring leader, Gideon like Gantry encounters among the established leaders persons whose ambitions actually dwarf his own. Colonel Marduc, the would-be kingmaker who "honestly felt that he had to become President, to save the country from sliding down through New Deal Socialism into anarchy,"<sup>23</sup> is exceeded only by his daughter Winifred Homeward, "the Talking Woman", of whom Lewis says "it is a reasonable bet that in 1955 she will be dictator of the United States and China" (GP, 320). A weak and sympathetic figure who compares roughly with Frank Shallard also appears in the person of Carlyle Vesper, a man "as simple as Cardinal Newman" (GP, 282). Vesper has initiated a society whose naive goal is to create a new church; however, the plan is abandoned by Gideon following his usurping of the society and subsequent relegation of Vesper to a menial position therein, a move which recalls Gantry's unscrupulous treatment of Frank. Finally, as always there are the silent, gullible multitudes who perpetuate Gideon's affluence through



their donations to the various organizations he manages.

However, at best Gideon Planish is but a poor repetition of Elmer Gantry. The earlier novel's power had stemmed in large part from the intensity and thoroughness with which the central figure had been presented; Lewis' purpose, to trace the career of a complete rogue, had been obvious, and he had pursued it consistently. Because of this, Elmer Gantry had been a logically sound book. By comparison, Gideon Planish is a vacillating and ambiguous work, for here the author is unsure of his central character, assigning to him character-traits that logically speaking are mutually exclusive. For, despite his supposed shrewdness and cunning, Gideon is also simultaneously seen as a most gullible, credulous and stupid person. On one occasion, he accepts a supposedly lucrative position as editor of a magazine, whose owner, Gideon later learns to his dismay, has actually been using him with no thought of really paying the handsome salary he promised. At another point in the book, he tries to assume control of a society for which he has been working, but because his attempted coup is so clumsily handled, he is apprehended and promptly dismissed.

That Lewis intended to use these examples of bungling to mock Gideon for satiric purposes is obvious. However, the mockery fails to achieve the desired effect, for in showing him as a fool as well as a shrewd charlatan we cannot accept either side of him, since the two aspects of his personality are conflicting, and cancel each other out, as it were; as such, we refuse to see either him or the world of which he is a part as a serious threat to the well-being of society.

The novel's conclusion suffers for much the same reasons. Throughout the bulk of the book Gideon has appeared, either as fool or





rogue, as a sterile, spiritually-deficient human being, utterly lacking in true values and sensitivity. However, at the novel's close Gideon is seen suddenly tiring of his existence and seeing it as hypocritical and meaningless; just as suddenly he becomes homesick for his old life at the university: " suddenly it was unendurable to think of going back to the city that was an hourly futility and a yearly defeat" (GP, 416). With no prior warning on Lewis' part, the novel changes its tone; Gideon is now presented to us as a basically sympathetic figure much like Babbitt, aware that his ostensibly successful life has been empty. Yet, in Babbitt Lewis had taken care to present his hero as anything but a rogue; there also our sympathy for the major character was buttressed by demonstrable instances of kindness, decency and a degree of sensitivity in the man himself. Here there is no evidence to support in any way Gideon's abrupt and uncharacteristic display of such sensitivity; on the contrary, he has been presented to us throughout as insensitive to the core. That such a man could suddenly emerge with the ability to assess himself honestly and intelligently is simply illogical; yet Lewis plainly intends us to accept this drastic character change, for the novel ends on a note of obvious pity for a trapped and unhappy man.

All these inconsistencies in Gideon as a character suggest that Lewis, though initially modelling his central figure on Elmer Gantry, appears to have lost sight of this original concept and, late in the novel, came to regard him as a basically decent man whose inner standards conflict with those of his wife and society. The concluding sections of the book seem to be dealing with a different character, a man quite distinct from the unscrupulous charlatan encountered at the novel's outset. While it is one thing for an author to trace the progress of a character through various



levels of moral awareness, it is quite another merely to present him to us suddenly, without apparent cause, as having changed. For these reasons, then, the novel fails, because since Gideon cannot be both simultaneously dupe and charlatan, honest and dishonest, moral and amoral, we as readers remain unconvinced by either portrayal.

Critics were quick to see the link between Cass Timberlane, 1945, and Main Street,<sup>24</sup> for both works examine the conflict that proceeds from a rebellious woman's marriage to an essentially practical and stolid man. However Cass Timberlane is more directly related to Dodsworth, for Cass' story is told from his point of view. Furthermore, Cass is seen much as was Sam Dodsworth, as an otherwise mature man whose love for his wife is his one weakness, an immature infatuation with a selfish woman who neither deserves nor merits such devotion.

The bulk of the novel deals with the breakdown in the relationship of a middle-aged, respectable judge, Cass Timberlane, and his young bride Jinny.<sup>25</sup> Though initially happy, the marriage deteriorates rapidly. Jinny soon tires of the sedate Cass, who in turn finds it increasingly difficult to adapt to the youthfully hedonistic life-style she desires. Bored and restless, Jinny drifts into the arms of the younger and more exuberant Bradd Criley, one of Cass' closest friends, and moves to New York to be with him. There she becomes seriously ill, and, though deserted by Bradd, is rescued by the still-adoring Cass, whose continuing devotion convinces her of her mistake. Jinny agrees to return with him, and they plan to begin anew, at which point the novel ends.

Throughout the novel Lewis traces the decline of Cass' marriage amidst a background of summarized marital relationships entitled "Assemblages of Husbands and Wives", which are inserted throughout the



book for purposes of comparison, in an apparent attempt to illustrate from a more generalized perspective the various difficulties apt to be encountered in married life. Importantly, few of the "Assemblages" portray happy marriages. Though not denying the possibility of happily married life, Lewis seems to be saying that a successful marriage is often very difficult, if not impossible, to attain. Though the selfishness of one of the partners is often the cause of marriage breakdown, Lewis is also aware that society's idealized and unrealistic view of marriage in general is an equally destructive factor. Certainly in Cass' case, the failure of his marriage stems as much from his sentimental idealization of Jinny as it does from her adultery.

Cass is a character much like Sam Dodsworth. A man of integrity, he is a true individual who "could not be guided"<sup>26</sup> by leader-type politicians, a man the community recognizes as "honest, courageous, and learned" (CT, 32). Though respected by all, Cass finds himself in danger of stifling in his own respectability; like Sam, he too desires escape from the routine pattern of activities he finds himself trapped by, the social niche which threatens to stereotype him. When first meeting Jinny, he sees her as a symbol of this freedom from the life of convention; in his loneliness, he foolishly but understandably convinces himself that "with her he could escape into the refuge of the Quiet Mind, away equally from the lonely Cass and from a world of booming politics and oratory" (CT, 33). In this sense, Cass regards Jinny much as Dodsworth did Fran, as an ideal creature whose vitality he thinks can provide him with the strength necessary to transcend the routine his life has become.

However, as it turns out Cass' assessment of Jinny is unsubstantiated in fact, for Jinny is a spoiled and licentious adolescent, a





vain and egocentric coquette, a vapid and unintelligent schoolgirl whose immaturity and selfishness prevent her from caring seriously for anybody. Before the marriage, she herself tells him in a rare moment of self-insight, "'I'm one of those changelings that can only give things to herself'" (CT, 122). Significantly, she only agrees to marry him after she loses her job, indicating that she regards Cass as a person to be used rather than loved.

As the marriage settles into a routine, Jinny's dissatisfaction with Cass and her role as his wife becomes increasingly strong, and culminates within two years in her affair and departure to New York with Bradd Criley. Following their separation, a lonely and despondent Cass gradually recovers and in the process develops more mature views regarding the institution of marriage. Significantly, his suffering produces in him a sensitivity he did not possess initially, an awareness that deep unhappiness exists throughout society, though hidden behind a facade of conjugal bliss. Ultimately, he comes to see that society's entire conception of love and marriage is unrealistic, causing expectations which can never be actualized, and producing as a result needless disillusionment and despair; furthermore, Cass sees that until we face the realities of marriage honestly, this unhappiness will continue. In short, a complete revaluation of our commonly-held shibboleths is mandatory if any melioration is to take place:

You cannot heal the problems of any one marriage until you heal the problems of an entire civilization founded upon suspicion and superstition; and you cannot heal the problems of a civilization thus founded until it realizes its own barbaric nature, and realizes that what it thought was brave was only cruel, what it thought was holy was only meanness, and what it thought Success was merely the paper helmet of a clown more nimble than his fellows, scrambling for a peanut in the dust of an ignoble circus. (CT, 373)



The novel could well end at this stage, Lewis having made several pointed statements regarding the destructive effects of society's tendency to idealize love and marriage out of all touch with reality. Nor would an ending here have been utterly pessimistic. Certainly Cass has developed in the course of the book; though emotionally scarred, he has been able to overcome his despair and is generally the better for his experience, having emerged, as did Dodsworth, a wiser and more mature man in the process. Lamentably, the novel does not end at this point. As was mentioned above, in an about-face as abrupt as any in his fiction Lewis reunites Jinny and Cass in the final pages, afraid, as it were, to accept the bleak conclusions toward which virtually every event in the novel has pointed.

The novel's happy ending destroys the book, for, in allowing the marriage to succeed where logically it should have failed, Lewis has had to emphasize the superficial circumstances of their reunion at the expense of any deeper considerations. Jinny's illness is of course the device which enables Lewis to reunite them; though a somewhat artificial device, it is not in itself utterly unrealistic. However, Lewis is in no way justified in using the illness as a means of consciously avoiding the original causes of the marriage's breakdown, which he does. For in fact all those factors responsible for the original failure of the marriage, though eclipsed by the immediate fact of Jinny's illness, are nevertheless still very much present, Lewis having made no direct effort to resolve them on their own terms. Rather, we are merely told that "in their kiss her love seemed to be utterly restored" (CT, 386). In spite of this, we cannot be convinced by such facile sentimentality, for the assurance of success given here is simply at variance with the rest



of the evidence in the novel. The result of this is that the book ends on a note the flaccidity of which negates in its wake most of its previous logic and certainly casts considerable doubt on the sincerity of its earlier statements regarding the hardships involved in married life.

Critics were understandably appalled by the novel's evasive and sentimental ending. As Schorer points out,<sup>27</sup> Philip Wylie even refused to believe Lewis capable of such a blatant reversal in point of view, and argued that Cass' obvious recapitulation to Jinny had been meant to be seen as such by the author, who had subtly assigned him to a future of doomed, emasculate subservience. Though one might wish to agree with Wylie, it is impossible to do so, for there is not the slightest sign of irony in the novel's final section; if anything, Jinny's return to Cass is viewed with Lewis' obvious blessings. For this reason alone Cass Timberlane can be seen as one of Lewis' least honest novels, and certainly his most annoying, for by his own hand the author has relegated an otherwise thoughtful study of love and marriage to the level of mawkish sentimentality.

Kingsblood Royal is not unlike It Can't Happen Here in that it too is concerned with an individual who discovers that he must enter into battle with a nightmarish world around him in order to preserve his integrity and defend newly-acquired principles and values. The story deals with the fate of Neil Kingsblood, a resident in a prosperous Northern community, who learns and later admits publicly that he is part (1/32) Negro. Following his declaration of Negro ancestry and subsequent ostracism from white society, Neil as a "Negro" encounters all varieties of racial prejudice and sees for the first time the true viciousness and intolerance in the world of which he was once an accepted





part. Though ordered to leave the white neighbourhood in which he lives, Neil refuses, and the novel ends in a physical battle between his incensed racist neighbours and a now-courageous Neil, his wife and their newly-acquired Negro (and white) friends, who have banded together to defend their common right to be treated as human beings.

The novel recalls themes present in the major works insofar as it suggests that the maintenance of an individual's integrity invariably involves direct conflict with and eventual isolation from an essentially corrupt milieu. Neil's alienation from his society, though forced upon him, enables him to view it from perspective as cruelly evil, rigidly intolerant and fearful of anything different or innovative, a world which regards even the most innocent deviation from the norm a threat to its sterile but materially secure well-being. The town's citizens, both rich and poor, are easily incited to a pitch of race-hatred by Gantry-like fanatics such as Jat Snood, a charlatan who capitalizes on the community's incipient racism for purposes of personal gain. Though Snood's appeal is to predominantly ignorant working-class whites, it becomes evident that his vicious racism is shared as well by Neil's supposedly most refined and sophisticated friends. On one occasion Neil attends a speech by a prominent lawyer who sees Negroes (along with Jews and Communists) as constituting a common threat to "'the pure, clean, square-dealing, enterprising, freely-competitive America of the Founding Fathers'".<sup>28</sup> The entire city, with only the odd exception, is portrayed by Lewis as uniformly and vehemently racist.

As Neil's community accepts blindly the myth that Negroes, though inferior, pose a serious threat to the white life-style they regard as sacrosanct, so it reveals the extent to which its citizens



have become indoctrinated and dehumanized in the process. Accordingly, Lewis describes the racists therein in grotesque and monstrous terms; at the novel's end, as they prepare to destroy Neil literally, they emerge explicitly as quite inhuman:

Dozens and then scores of men and excited women filled the yards opposite, oozed into the street. Aggressive men pushed forward in the center, men whose killer faces were the more grotesque above their pert ties, their near-gentlemanly tweed jackets.

They ceased to be human beings; they became bubbles on a dark cataract of hate. (KR, 345)

At the same time, the Negroes in the novel, by virtue of their alienation from this dehumanized world, have retained their individuality and appear almost without exception as superior in their possession of integrity and dignity. Neil sees on first meeting his Negro friends that "he felt that he had come on a new world that was stranger than the moon, darker than the night, brighter than morning hills, a world exciting and dangerous" (KR, 152). As they have never experienced the necessity to conform to the rigid and sterile conventions of white society, as they have never been pressured to sell their souls, so they have retained an individualism which white society has sacrificed. Neil sees them throughout the book as happier people, in spite of their suffering, and at times envies them; on one occasion he reflects that a Negro friend's son "was lucky; he would not be sent in a plush-lined coffin through Princeton and the officers' club; he could honorably be independent and poor" (KR, 168). In short, the Negro world with its lack of rigidity provides a potential for human freedom impossible for a white, and the Negroes have emerged much the better for it.

Similarly, Neil comes to realize that his alienation from the white world is a blessing in disguise; more mature as a result of his experiences, he has discovered the value of man as an individual, whether



he be Negro or white, a discovery of which under normal circumstances he would never have been made aware.

The novel's conclusion echoes It Can't Happen Here in tone, for Lewis, though taking a generally pessimistic position, provides at the same time enough instances of individual integrity to qualify the pessimism somewhat with the belief that true individuals are present who can and will combat the forces of social repression; the picture at the novel's end is far from a purely desperate one. As it is similar to that earlier novel, so it was praised for much the same reasons as a valuable social tract; the N.A.A.C.P. cited it as an important contribution to inter-racial understanding. Critics were less sympathetic. Warren Beck believed that its serious flaws called to mind similar deficiencies which could be found throughout the entire gamut of Lewis' career, and argued accordingly:

Kingsblood Royal is one more up-and-coming attempt at a timely and socially implicative matter. Still spreading himself in his callow way, however, Lewis has further confused a complex problem by arbitrary caricature, has denied his protagonist consistency and dignity, to the nullification of theme, and has injected into social drama the debasing tone of farce and the disrupting element of personal escape. His view of the race problem lacks both social and psychological penetration, as did his tale of fascism in America, and he had not the intuitive sympathy and artistic power to enhance Neil Kingsblood's story with a pity and terror potential in it. He could bring to it only his old bag of tricks.<sup>29</sup>

While Beck's position is extreme, it must be admitted that Kingsblood Royal does indeed contain many flaws which limit its success as a work of serious and lasting importance. By comparison with the works of the 1920's, the novel is clumsy and blunt, the social issue therein overstated and lacking in subtlety. In making his point regarding the fact of racism in the North, Lewis' exaggerated the intensity of racist feeling in his fictional context to a scarcely credible level. Understandably preoccupied with this one facet of American life, Lewis transferred his







own preoccupation to the novel's characters to the extent that they appear obsessed by racist considerations. Hatred of Negroes seems virtually the sole concern of the community. In addition, the book lacks that degree of detachment which characterized the more sophisticated satires of the 1920's. Lewis makes no attempt to temper his hatred, as he did in Babbitt or Elmer Gantry, with skillfully-executed mockery and scorn; as a result, the satire becomes shrill. So anxious is he to show racism as repulsive and monstrous that he makes the novel's racists utter monsters, and denies them any humanity in the process. However, as monsters, they become unreal, and thus cannot convince us that their presence in society is a legitimate threat.

The novel is unrealistic in other ways, as well. Neil's admission of Negro ancestry is far-fetched, for it is hardly likely that the insensitive, Babbitt-like racist which he is at the novel's outset would ever possess sufficient courage to defy his society in this way. Society's reaction to Neil as a Negro is similarly unconvincing; that an entire city would band together to destroy a relatively insignificant bank clerk on the slender pretext that he is 1/32 Negro is, frankly, too extreme a response to be credible.

But even more damaging to the novel is Lewis' own confusion regarding racism. Though obviously deploring the cruelties that accompany racial discrimination, Lewis is nevertheless of divided mind when it comes to the question of differences between Negro and white. On one hand, he denies that there are any such differences, but on the other he seems convinced that Negroes are in fact superior to whites, and thus "different". Though both positions could be examined thoroughly and without inconsistency, Lewis does not do this; rather, he vacillates



between them. Issues that arise from one position are raised, but left unresolved, for Lewis shifts his ground and in doing so ignores problems that, were they to be discussed more intensively, would have made the novel more intellectually satisfying. For example, early in the book a good deal is made of a point articulated several times by Neil's Negro friends to the effect that, if racism is a myth (a belief which Lewis at this point seems also to share), then Neil is, in declaring himself a "Negro", stereotyping himself in much the same way as would a racist. Similarly, in doing so, he is by implication succumbing to or at least admitting the validity of the most basic of the racist's assumptions -- that there are actual differences between Negro and white -- an assumption which both he and Lewis are supposedly trying to deny. Though Neil does subsequently decide to "become" a Negro, the question as to his having played into the racists' hands is not mentioned again, Lewis having by now shifted his position. For as it turns out, Neil is in fact a different person as a Negro, a better man than he was before. It should be noted that this is not an unrealistic development in itself; it is entirely credible that painful experiences can be maturing ones. However, Lewis suggests that Neil is a better man not merely because of his experiences, but as a result of his having become a Negro and having acquired in the process their virtues which have been liberated within him, as it were.

In arguing thus, Lewis becomes almost a racist in reverse; by depicting Negroes as almost invariably superior to whites, by minimizing instances of Negro corruption and venality and simultaneously maximizing the evil in white society, Lewis presents a thesis as oversimplified as is that held by the most bigoted Negro-hater, a point of view as super-



ficial as is the one he is attacking. Thus, though Kingsblood Royal is a powerful and well-intentioned work which certainly succeeds as an indictment or an expose (or even as a prophesy in ways), it cannot be said to succeed either in a satiric or a realistic sense. Here, more than anywhere else in his fiction, Lewis' hatred overcame him, at the expense of his craft as a satirist and an artist.





## CONCLUSION

The body of the dissertation has been concerned with examining in detail how Lewis' vision of man and society was expressed in a particular way. There remains the task of evaluating the worth of Lewis generally as a writer, a task which is made difficult in light of his many poor novels, works whose artistic deficiencies can unfortunately also be found even in that core of books generally regarded as his best. The most glaring of these flaws is the almost exclusively superficial portrayal on Lewis' part of his characters, scenes and situations; throughout his novels, little if any substance or complexity of feeling or emotion to his fictionalized creations can be found. Even his most sensitive and sympathetically-portrayed figures -- Carol Kennicott, Arrowsmith and Dodsworth -- lack this inner depth, and are more often seen as behaving rather than feeling, reacting rather than reflecting. As Geoffrey Moore has observed, there is little if any "innerness" to a Lewis character, the author allowing us to assign our own motives to the actions of his men and women, as it were. Numerous difficulties arise from this omission. First, though the way in which his characters behave is presented convincingly enough, we as readers are provided in general with nothing but their behaviour, which tends accordingly to appear gratuitous, unmotivated by any exercise of will on their parts. This purely superficial presentation of his characters has led several critics to conclude that in a Lewis novel we are in a "world of the dead"; as Whipple pointed out, "Lewis's world is a social desert, and for the best of reasons, that it is a human desert. It is a social void because



each of its members is personally a human emptiness."<sup>2</sup> Continuing, Whipple adds that "the central vacuum at the core of these people is the secret which explains their manifestations. Having no substance in themselves, they are incapable of being genuine. They are not individual persons; they have never developed personality."<sup>3</sup> Rather, they are robots, behavioural automatons who react to stimuli but lack a soul. Secondly, because his characters do not appear to act of their own accord, -- in short, as they are puppet-like -- we are made more aware of Lewis' presence in his novels as a type of puppet-master; in every book Lewis is always very obviously in control of his characters and their situations. That illusion of reality so important to successful and sophisticated fiction is lost; his characters cease to convey the illusion that they possess independent life and mind and appear only as mouth-pieces for his own ideas. Finally, the result of this is, as Walter Lippman observed, that the reader becomes annoyed by Lewis' refusal to step down from his position of omniscient narrator -- a position he made little effort to hide -- and allow us to observe his characters as they are, rather than as he viewed them: "Had he a real interest in character, and not such a preoccupation with behavior, he would have expressed his view of the world through all his characters, and not through one mouth-piece."<sup>4</sup> Too "absorbed in his own vision of things,"<sup>5</sup> Lewis' presence as author, existing between the reader and the books' characters, is almost always evident.

Lewis' emphasis on the superficial aspects of man at the expense of the more basic considerations regarding the human condition has led to the further observation that in Lewis' fiction this surface of life, vivid though it may be, is presented to us as if it were the whole of



reality; as Geismar has remarked, an approach so lacking in an awareness<sup>1</sup> of the depths of human emotion and passion, so deficient in terms of subtlety and complexity, is in a sense a most limited form of realism and that, as such, Lewis cannot be termed the thorough realist he has commonly been thought to be.

Stylistically speaking, Lewis is similarly deficient. A man who once remarked scornfully that he considered stylistic considerations to be the concern of the literary dilettante,<sup>6</sup> Lewis' own work more than substantiates his general disregard for the techniques of artistic composition. As a writer, he far too often became lost in the immediacy of his fictional situations. As such, his work becomes, as E. M. Forster has observed, more the product of a photographer in the guise of a novelist, a man able to capture particular moments in time but unable to unify these particulars into a symbolic form that has general and universal significance. "So long as a writer has the freshness of youth on him, he can work the snapshot method, but when it passes he has nothing to fall back upon. It is here that he differs from the artist. The artist has the power of retaining and digesting experiences, which, years later, he may bring forth in a different form; to the end of life he is accompanied by a secret store."<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, among others, Lewis' work is repetitious, involving similar characters, incidents and situations. Even his major novels tend to be too lengthy to sustain our continued interest. For example, Elmer Gantry falls into two major sections which at times contain identical scenes to the point of outright duplication. Carol Kennicott encounters the same experiences time and time again in Main Street; Sam Dodsworth's many quarrels with his wife are all variations





of a single theme; even the more firmly plotted Arrowsmith repeats itself on numerous occasions. Indeed, in that his books lose intensity in inverse proportion to ~~their~~ often-excessive length, it is difficult to disagree with Krutch when he points to Lewis' tendency to bore his readers.

Possibly another reason for his novels' repetitiousness can be found in the fact that Lewis failed to progress past a certain basic set of assumptions regarding man and society which he developed early in his career. It has been shown previously that much of his later work borrowed too heavily from themes he had utilized in the 1920's; however, even the major works fall prey to the charge of repetition. Dodsworth for the most part is merely a restatement of themes and problems raised in Arrowsmith; Babbitt in many ways is a re-examination of the situation of Main Street encountered from a slightly different perspective; even Arrowsmith itself bears a strong resemblance to the early and immature Trail of the Hawk. All of this suggests a static quality to Lewis and tends also to localize his work within a particular historical framework that of course detracts from its ultimate importance.

Nor do his social assumptions impress by virtue of their particular profundity. With remarkably few exceptions, the situations which Lewis deals with are mere variations of a success-theme as simple and predictable as anything encountered in a Horatio Alger novel. Correspondingly, as his basic observations are simple, so only a limited number of character-types are needed to illustrate these observations and can be found appearing again and again throughout his work, as the body of the dissertation has shown.

Lewis' undeniable separate flaws -- his reliance on a limited



stock of often burlesque and grotesquely overdrawn characters, his repetition of simple plots and themes, his disregard for stylistic considerations, his all-too-frequent retreats into fantasy and sentimentality -- all have been well documented. Were this the whole of Lewis, his obscure and insignificant status would indeed be merited. However, there is more to the author than this mere catalogue of deficiencies. An even more basic characteristic of Lewis as a writer looms behind these individual flaws, examination of which will hopefully lead to a more complete assessment of his true place in American fiction. It will be noted that all the above deficiencies point directly to a lack of meticulous concern on his part as a writer, an inability or disinclination to approach the problems of his craft with the detailed and intricate scrupulousness that, one assumes, usually attends the composition and creation of meaningful literature. Rebecca West put it well when she remarked that Lewis was unable to "sit still so that life could make any deep impression on him."<sup>8</sup> As he wrote hurriedly and at times furiously (a fact that has been well documented by Schorer), this very speed with which he composed his work no doubt accounted at least partially for his ignoring of those technical minutiae, attention to which might have given his fiction that necessary stylistic unity and structural complexity which in turn would have raised it from the purely second-rate. But more importantly, this lack of scrupulousness applies to Lewis' thought as well, and is no doubt similarly responsible for his tendency to generalize his characters, their experiences and the situations of conflict in which they find themselves, and to overlook and omit in the process those complexities within human personality which distinguish a character from a mere character-type. Thus, for the same



reason that we are not given an intricate, closely-conceived prose style, so we are not presented with intricate characterizations and sophisticated conflict-situations. Such intellectual laziness can be dangerous, as it leads to an oversimplification of issues which are in reality complex; as Beck has shown, not only Kingsblood Royal but even the major novels as well can be indicted on these grounds alone. However, as Walter Lippman has wisely observed, this tendency to generalize can have value as well. Pointing out that few of us have either the time or the ability to see the human condition in all its complexity, Lippman adds:

For the apprehension of the external world, and that of the larger environment which is invisible, we are almost helpless until we are supplied with patterns of seeing which enable us to fix objects clearly amidst the illegible confusion of experience. When we find a pattern which works well, in that it allows us to feel that we have made a large area of reality our own, we are grateful, and we use that pattern until it is threadbare. For to invent new patterns requires more genius than most of us have, and to deal with life freshly in all its variety is much too much trouble for preoccupied men. As a mere matter of economy in time and trouble, we demand simple and apparently universal stereotypes with which to see the world.<sup>9</sup>

Lewis, Lippman goes on to say, serves a valuable purpose in providing us with these "patterns". Though Lewis' stereotypes, as observations on man, are rarely profoundly wise or universally true, they are nevertheless shrewd, and have value in that they accurately generalize certain human responses in relation to a particular point in time. The danger, of course, lies in mistaking Lewis' generalizations and oversimplifications for the whole of reality; however, if we can accept them as means of ordering reality, realizing that Lewis' Babbitts, Gantrys, Zeniths and Gopher Prairies are not to be taken as the whole truth about businessmen, ministers, cities, or towns, we can benefit from them insofar as they do provide us with legitimate knowledge -- if not wisdom -- regarding





these particular aspects of man and society.

Lippman's defence of Lewis, though accurate in itself, does not go far enough, for it tends to dismiss the possibility that the author ever moved beyond the function of merely providing us with historically-accurate but artistically-limited social schemata. To this it may be added that in a few of his novels -- in particular, those of the 1920's -- Lewis occasionally goes beyond the portrayal of generalized character-types moving within all-too-dated social frameworks. The most obvious example of this occurs in Babbitt. In that novel, in the midst of the distinctly labelled world in which the central figure moves, Babbitt's situation when seen in its totality takes on a significance beyond the limits of its historical confines. As James Branch Cabell remarked, Babbitt "is one of those satisfying large symbols which at long intervals some author hits upon, and which promptly take on a life that is not confined to the books wherein they first figured."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, George Babbitt is virtually archetypal, to an extent an Everyman, in that his plight has been raised beyond the purely satiric portrayal to a sympathetic awareness of the general condition which he typifies. When Babbitt sees in the Maine woods that "merely to run away was folly, because he could never run away from himself", when he realizes "that he could never run away from Zenith and family and office, because in his own brain he bore the office and the family and every street and disquiet and illusion of Zenith" (B, 242), we are given a brief but meaningful insight into the plight of all men who suddenly realize that they are trapped by their lives, incapable of more meaningful existences. In his other major works as well, Lewis utilized themes that have general relevance and meaning. Behind the dated particulars of



Arrowsmith, behind all its flaws and ambiguities, there is a larger awareness of man's universal struggle with the temptation to compromise the truth that places the novel above its contemporary context. Martin's varied career, his numerous lapses from grace and his final removal from society in the interests of actualizing his life's ambition complete a picture of human integrity and dedication which exists beyond the particulars of his immediate situation. A similar case can be made for Dodsworth. To a lesser extent, Carol Kennicott's reactions to Gopher Prairie typify the plight of the sensitive person caught in an insensitive and unsympathetic world of philistines which has a universal significance apart from the purely historical or sociological. Yet again, behind Elmer Gantry is an awareness and portrayal of human opportunism, unscrupulousness and evil; the spiritual charlatans of any period partake of enough of Elmer's attributes to justify his existence as a viable character-type of lasting significance. To this a handful of other character-creations could be added as well, all of whom have a reality independent of their fictional settings. Certain of Lewis' women for example, if they do not have the immortality of a Babbitt or an Arrowsmith, are still presented with a good deal of satiric skill. In addition, Lewis' virtual host of snobs, poseurs, pseudo-intellectuals, spiritual bullies and charlatans that appear throughout his work, though done in miniature, also enrich the novels in which they appear and buttress the awareness of human frailties and foibles to which so great a portion of Lewis' talents are directed to exposing.

At the same time, Lewis' other novels cannot be ignored, for they are unquestionably poor. Critics have believed their failure to have been caused by Lewis' refusal to confront his present with concepts



more directly pertinent to it; instead, it is argued, he repeated himself. However, Lewis' reliance on his earlier, previously-employed plots, situations and character-types is not in fact the cause of the later novels' failure. On the contrary, the poor books are poor insofar as they deviate from the themes and concerns that appeared in the major work, to the degree that they avoid facing the conditions of the 1930's and 1940's which were essentially exaggerations of those which Lewis had earlier exposed. The major novels had depicted with great intensity and honesty a brutal, repressive society in whose midst manifestations of true individuality and freedom, man's only hope for a more meaningful world, were rarely to be found. Significantly, the world of the 1930's and 1940's, with its depressions, dictators and wars made Lewis if anything something of a prophet, in that all those factors responsible for the new conditions he had outlined in the works of the 1920's. With the Ganttrys triumphant, with the Babbitts conforming as never before, with the rebels and idealists like Carol Kennicott now jailed or jobless, with the Arrowsmiths and Dodsworths having even more difficulty in achieving independence and freedom -- in short, with virtually every aspect of his original social vision having become more intensified -- Lewis could conceivably have retained and even strengthened his relevance in the new age. Lamentably, he did not do this, unable as he was to face the bitter conclusions to which his own earlier social observations should have led him. Thus, the later novels fail not merely because Lewis ignored the world about him, but because he ignored the relationship between existing conditions and his own previous vision of reality. Had he faced these conditions in more of his later novels (he did





manage to, on the whole, in It Can't Happen Here, Cass Timberlane and Kingsblood Royal), other books such as Ann Vickers conceivably might have been legitimate and relevant as well. Instead, fearing that the results of an unwaveringly honest examination of the new age would have been too pessimistic, he lapsed into sentimentality, evasiveness and superficiality. In an attempt to give hope where logically there should have been none he ignored in the process implications that he should have followed through as proceeding from those basic social observations which he had developed in his earlier period. To borrow Schorer's phrase, the later novels are "half-truths" also, in that they minimize all those repressive social forces in the interests of attaining optimistic conclusions. In short, they ignore too much of reality. It has been mentioned that Lewis felt the need to reassure an America he saw was badly in need of reassurance, that he became a propagandist in the interests of this cause and sacrificed his art in doing so. To this it can be added that the very weakness of these later, unconvincingly optimistic books attests to the truth of his more pessimistic social vision as it appears in the major novels. Though unconvinced by the facile successes of a Myron Weagle or a Fred Cornplow, the failures of Carol Kennicott and Babbitt -- and just as importantly, the triumphs of Arrowsmith and Dodsworth -- become by comparison all the more convincing and realistic, because in those earlier novels Lewis described unsparingly the destructive powers of society. Thus, in an ironic way, the later works have value insofar as their deficiencies highlight the virtues of Lewis' major fiction.

Lewis' final importance, then, lies in his having created in the midst of all his failures a handful of enduring characterizations moving within realistically-portrayed settings, whose significance will



persist as long as will such responses to life. Geoffrey Moore saw this enduring aspect to Lewis, and remarked that though

A thousand increments of commercially or altruistically motivated lessons in culture, in learning, in sophistication, have transformed the social scene in America; yet hypocrisy, provincialism, prejudice, all forms of materialism, have only changed their clothes to mingle, as they have always done, with the crowd. New writers -- Mary McCarthy, for example -- are better equipped to describe these clothes. But the face -- is it not the same face that Lewis saw?<sup>11</sup>

To this it could be added that, when these successfully executed characterizations are seen together, when the general truth of the situations in which they are involved is removed from the historical "clothing" of which Moore speaks, an overall view of society and individuality emerges which continues to have relevance and value. For Lewis' ultimate concerns, steeped though they are in topicality, are nevertheless those which should concern us all. To read Lewis is to be reminded of the supreme value of human freedom, of the struggle that is necessary in the attainment of this freedom, and of the horror and despair that attends a life of social enslavement; in short, it is to be made aware of the absolute importance of a vital and thriving social democracy. In this sense, in that Lewis confronts us with such basics, he can be said to have given us a great deal.



## APPENDIX

### A. Minor Novels

In addition to those works discussed within the body of the dissertation, Lewis also published three minor novels -- The Innocents, 1917, Free Air, 1919 and Mantrap, 1926 -- and dozens of short stories throughout his career. The novels were originally written as magazine serials; only later, when Lewis believed that they might as novels sell profitably, were they expanded into lengths suitable for book publication. Importantly, all three were by Lewis' own admission written merely for commercial purposes, as were the short stories.<sup>1</sup> As a result, though they are not to be taken seriously in themselves, certain incidental similarities can be found to the major work which bear passing mention.<sup>2</sup>

Written in two weeks, The Innocents was considered even too sentimental for publication in the Saturday Evening Post and was actually rejected on those grounds. It concerns the fortunes of "Ma and Pa" Appleby, an elderly couple who, desiring to escape their drab lives in the city, gamble their savings on a tea-house by the sea, an enterprise which fails. In despair, they decide to embark on an improbable tramp through America, free at last from the routine which has dominated them throughout their lives. Their fame as courageous nomads spreads, and the story ends idyllically with Pa, now a strong and resolute individual, accepting a lucrative position in a department store offered him by an admiring shopkeeper.

Free Air deals with the romance between Claire Boltwood, an





aristocratic eastern socialite and Milt Daggett, an unsophisticated westener, whom she meets while on a cross-country motor-trip with her father. Inspired by their adventure, Milt decides to make a similar trip by himself. Naturally, their paths cross many times, Milt helping the Boltwoods out of numerous predicaments during the journey. Though attracted to Milt, the snobbish Claire finds it initially difficult to overlook his lack of refinement. However, by the novel's close she has come to her senses, realizing that Milt's honest, rustic strength and freedom from social convention is preferable to the rigid social code of her family, that her family's snobbery is pretentious and unfounded, since all Americans share a common but proud heritage of pioneer rusticity. Accordingly, she decides to forsake the genteel world for the life of romance and adventure offered her by Milt, at which point the story ends.

Mantrap was based loosely on a fishing trip Lewis had made with his brother Claude. The hero is Ralph Prescott, a successful but overworked lawyer who, fearing a nervous breakdown, escapes to the Canadian north with a friend, Wes Woodbury. The two soon quarrel, however, and Ralph deserts him for the more congenial company of a local woodsman, Joe Easter. At Easter's home Ralph falls in love with his flirtatious and worthless wife Alverna (the "mantrap") but, fearing he will succumb to her charms and betray his friendship for Easter, he decides to leave. However, he is pursued by Alverna who coaxes him to take her with him, which he does. Easter, magnanimously desiring to save Ralph from the fickle Alverna, pursues them in turn and catches up to them. The three travel south to Winnipeg where Alverna departs on her own for the States, having been unable to "trap" either of them. A guilty Ralph offers to establish Joe in New York by way of recompense, but Joe, again magnanimously,



refuses to take advantage of his friend and they part, Ralph supposedly the better man for his experiences.

In each case the novels' major characters, though repressed or limited by their surroundings at the outset, possess sufficient reserves of strength to achieve the necessary escape from restricting and conventional routines. As in the major work, Lewis sets his individuals against more conventional figures who are satirized for their conformity in an attempt to emphasize the heroes' strengths. Thus, he contrasts the Applebys with their conventional daughter, Milt with Claire's snobbish family, the sensitive Ralph with the oafish Woodbury. Other minor similarities can be found as well. The conflict between the eastern and western life-styles is evident in Free Air and Mantrap. Also, though Ma Appleby is something of a feminist, women are regarded in Free Air and Mantrap with the usual Lewis scorn; Alverna and Claire possess characteristics such as selfishness and snobbery that appear in Lewis' major female figures such as Fran Dodsworth.

Similarities end here, however, for unlike the major works these books contain virtually no social criticism whatever; on the contrary, they are uniformly affirmative, optimistic and reassuring, if unconvincingly so. Each is glutted with inexcusably sentimental incidents (the pathetic Applebys whom "nobody wants"; the rustic Milt and Joe shamed and humiliated repeatedly); each is based on a trite and petty situation; all end on a note of idyllic happiness which in no way is justified by prior events. Though the books give a facade of realism, beginning with situations recognizable in everyday life, the ensuing action depicts life not as it is, but ideally, as the public would like to believe. Accordingly, the Applebys enjoy success where by all accounts they should



fail; Joe Easter forgives Ralph and his wife where logically he would not; Claire renounces her snobbish family, where in all likelihood she would probably remain a snob.

It could be argued that in writing these novels Lewis was lowering himself to the immature literary standards of the very people he satirized in his major works, for without doubt the novels are written with the popular mass culture in mind; certainly Babbitt, who desired "a good story which would enable a fellow to forget his troubles" (B, 219), would likely have enjoyed Mantrap and Free Air. Indeed, had Lewis written nothing else, it would be impossible to view him as other than a vapid sentimentalist. However, as he obviously knew better, it can be argued that such books stem from that same satiric awareness of the public's vulgarity that was seen in his major work, since in order to write either satire or successful<sup>3</sup> popular fiction it is necessary to possess a fairly intimate knowledge of the popular mind. In short, Lewis' potboilers and short stories actually proceed from the same insight which produced his satire, the author capitalizing on his understanding of the public's shoddy standards and false values and incorporating them into his stories, utilizing those various literary devices and contrivances which he knew would produce certain responses in the minds of unsophisticated readers. In a sense, then, these minor writings, though foolish and weak in themselves, complement the larger, satirical works and add to our understanding of Lewis as a satirist, for, were they to have appeared within one of his major novels -- had Babbitt, for example, been observed actually reading The Innocents or Mantrap -- they would themselves very likely have been regarded as satiric.





## B. The Man Who Knew Coolidge

The Man Who Knew Coolidge is in a class by itself; it is not really a novel at all, but rather an extended version of a satiric monologue Lewis had originally written for Mencken's American Mercury in 1928. Here we are presented with the "constructive and Nordic citizen"<sup>4</sup> Lowell Schmaltz, an obscure office-supply salesman whose empty, bombastic tirades constitute the whole of the book. The monologues recall several of Babbitt's more absurd soliloquies. In fact, Schmaltz epitomizes the worst of Babbitt insofar as he too represents a general class of persons conditioned to conform to the all-dominant materialistic ethic of the times. As in Babbitt, quantity alone matters in Schmaltz's value-system. Thus he regards the vulgar and garish little bungalows that now dot the once-unspoiled California coast as "dandy", the din of jazz as aesthetically delightful, the sound of countless Fords drowning out the roar of the sea as evidence of the "'providence and care of God that has always guided the destinies of the American people'" (MC, 100). But also, like Babbitt, Schmaltz is a victim of this society, trapped in a sterile and unsatisfying marriage, at bottom vaguely frustrated and unhappy but ignorant as to why. As would be expected, he is a thorough hypocrite who "believes" in Prohibition but drinks nonetheless, arguing that his respect for the law "'don't mean you got to be a fanatic'" (MC, 54). Similarly, he can spew forth high-sounding democratic ideals which he neither believes in nor has the least inclination even to understand. Speaking of the Germans, he observes that "'if they haven't understood our democratic ideas, they ought to've been forced to'" (MC, 54).

When examined as a literary device, The Man Who Knew Coolidge



is interesting in that it isolates a technique which Lewis used throughout his work. First, Schmaltz is in no way a real person, but merely a satiric mouthpiece, articulating the prevailing conventions of his day. As Dooley says, "his mind is simply a reverberating device for the advertising slogans and chauvinistic propaganda which are his society's substitutes for cultural expression."<sup>5</sup> Secondly, through Schmaltz Lewis is able to satirize in turn anything which his speaker believes or admires, having made his oafishness so abundantly clear at the outset of the monologue. In that Schmaltz accepts in its entirety all the prevailing mores of his times, as his mind is a mere reservoir of his age's every fatuity, so we are made aware both of his utter spiritual emptiness and that of the America he worships. Schmaltz's awe of material progress, his belief in the value of boosting, his love of possessions, his ludicrous admiration for the banal, colourless and "safe" Coolidge -- in short, his completely uncritical acceptance of American society -- combine to reveal not only his sterility but also that of the world which has surrounded him and glutted his mind with these meaningless and fatuous precepts.

Though amusing and witty, The Man Who Knew Coolidge cannot be considered successful satire for several reasons. First, the book is too lengthy to sustain our interest by virtue of its monotonous employment of the speaking voice of Schmaltz alone as the book's single satiric device. We are at no point given respite from Schmaltz's increasingly tedious and tiresome catalogue of his nonsensical beliefs and maxims, at no stage offered relief from his continuous display of vulgarity and hypocrisy. As Grebstein observed, "the very intensity of such a performance demands that it be brief, and brief it is not;" rather, it



"shows us Lewis's satiric impulse run amok."<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Schmaltz is not complex enough as a figure to merit the exhaustive attention he receives. The satiric success of Babbitt had stemmed in part from Babbitt's comparatively complex personality; as he was recognizably human, so his foibles became more obvious as such. But Schmaltz is presented merely as a voice, or more accurately a recording, blaring forth nothing but hateful and vicious prejudice and hypocrisy, rather than as a prejudiced or hypocritical man, possessing a personality of some complexity, as Babbitt was. Finally, as was the case in Kingsblood Royal and many of Lewis' weaker works, here the author's lack of subtlety defeats him. So anxious was Lewis to deny Schmaltz any humanity whatever that he becomes non-human, utterly unable to suffer, or for that matter feel anything at all. Accordingly, his credibility is limited, for as a tape-recording rather than a person we cannot take him as seriously as we could Babbitt, and the satiric effect is considerably dampened. Thus, although The Man Who Knew Coolidge provides an excellent example of the satiric monologue, Lewis' favourite satiric device, it also shows how limited that device can be when it is neither tempered with detachment on the author's part nor buttressed by the use of alternative satirical tools.





## FOOTNOTES

### Introduction:

<sup>1</sup>Krutch, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, ed. Mark Schorer, 149.

<sup>2</sup>Warren Beck, "How Good is Sinclair Lewis," College English, 179.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 83.

<sup>5</sup>Mark Schorer, "Method of Half-Truths," from Essays, 54.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 57.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 61.

<sup>8</sup>See Maxwell Geismar, Last of Provincials,

<sup>9</sup>Schorer, for example, assumes this position. Referring to Mencken's review of Main Street, which praised Lewis for seeing that Carol is no better than her husband Will, Schorer disagrees, arguing that Lewis "by no means thought of 'her superior culture' as 'chiefly bogus'" (Essays, 3).

### Chapter I:

<sup>1</sup>An earlier novel, Hike and the Airplane, had been written in 1912, but was a boys' book, written under a pseudonym, and is not discussed in the dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn, 1. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated W.

<sup>3</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 19.

<sup>4</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Trail of the Hawk, 3. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated H.

<sup>5</sup>For that matter, there are other similarities between Carl and Arrowsmith as well. Both are idealistic but practical men who must defy a conservative society to realize their goals; both have considerable trouble with status-conscious women to whom they are unfortunately attracted; most importantly, of course, both are sufficiently strong to overcome these influences.



<sup>6</sup> Lewis would rarely describe society in totally negative terms. Even Babbitt's friends possess certain redeeming features; even Fran Dodsworth, who embodies society, is beautiful and charming.

<sup>7</sup> Carpenter, "Fortress of Reality," College English, 418.

<sup>8</sup> Dooley, Art of Lewis, 237-238.

<sup>9</sup> Sinclair Lewis, The Job, 3-4. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated J.

<sup>10</sup> Dooley, Art of Lewis, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Geismar, Last of Provincials, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction, 168.

<sup>13</sup> Later, a more cynical Lewis would describe the real estate business as "the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay" (Babbitt, 6).

## Chapter II:

<sup>1</sup> These works, The Innocents and Free Air, relate only incidentally to Lewis' development and are examined in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 64.

<sup>3</sup> Becker, "Apostle to the Philistines," American Scholar, 424.

<sup>4</sup> Hicks, "Sinclair Lewis and the Good Life," English Journal, 266.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Van Doran, Contemporary American Novelists, 146.

<sup>7</sup> Sinclair Lewis, Main Street, 7. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated MS.

<sup>8</sup> This raises the larger question as to the degree to which Lewis sympathized with the naturalist position that a person's environment was largely responsible for his lot in life. That the original title of the novel was in fact "The Village Virus," the original hero, Guy Pollock, suggests that Lewis at one point intended to absolve his characters from personal responsibility. However, in the final version the title has been changed and Pollock has been relegated to a minor role. Also, at one point Carol remarks on his personal weakness (see page 12). All of this suggests that Lewis meant us to see Pollock's weakness as being primarily responsible for his failure in life, and that had he been stronger, he could have escaped.



<sup>9</sup>Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, 356.

<sup>10</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 71.

<sup>11</sup>Schorer, afterword to Main Street, 439.

<sup>12</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 70.

<sup>13</sup>Sinclair Lewis, "Main Street's Been Paved," from The Man from Main Street, 311-312.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

### Chapter III:

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca West, Joseph Warren Beach and Edward Wagenknecht state their preference for Babbitt explicitly. Other critics such as George Becker, Warren Beck and Thomas Horton feel that while Lewis was generally but a mediocre writer, the book was still a significant achievement.

<sup>2</sup>Mencken, "Babbitt Redivivus," American Mercury, 254.

<sup>3</sup>Hoffman, The Twenties, 414.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>It is necessary only to compare Babbitt with Lowell Schmaltz of The Man Who Knew Coolidge to substantiate the truth of this, for Schmaltz's lack of humanity destroys much of that satire's effect (see Appendix).

<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt, 5. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated B.

<sup>7</sup>Geismar, Last of Provincials, 108.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>9</sup>Lewis had originally conceived the novel as taking place during a typical day in Babbitt's life, but later expanded the book, realizing that the 24-hour period was too confining.

<sup>10</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 86.

<sup>11</sup>See Main Street: "Always she perceived that the churches. . . were still, in Gopher Prairie, the strongest of the forces compelling respectability" (317).





#### Chapter IV:

<sup>1</sup>Schorer, afterword to Arrowsmith, 431. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated A.

<sup>2</sup>See "Sinclair Lewis Discovers a Hero," from Interpretations of "Arrowsmith", ed. Griffin, 19-23.

<sup>3</sup>Whipple, "Arrowsmith," from Interpretations of "Arrowsmith", ed. Griffin, 35.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>5</sup>Hicks, "Sinclair Lewis and the Good Life," English Journal, 267.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 42.

<sup>8</sup>Schorer, afterword to Arrowsmith, 435.

<sup>9</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 94.

<sup>10</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 110.

#### Chapter V:

<sup>1</sup>Mencken, "Man of God: American Style," American Mercury, 506.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 507.

<sup>5</sup>So eager was Mencken to praise the novel that he actually misread it, citing as proof of Elmer's sincerity (and, accordingly, Lewis' objectivity), the fact that at the book's end Elmer appears to have overcome the temptations of the flesh. However, on the last page Lewis suggests that the opposite is the case, for Elmer beholds a new choir-girl "with whom he would certainly have to become well-acquainted" (EG, 416).

<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry, [vi]. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated EG.

<sup>7</sup>See Schorer, An American Life, 475.

<sup>8</sup>West, "Elmer Gantry," from Essays, 39.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 42.



- <sup>10</sup>West, "Elmer Gantry," from Essays, 42.
- <sup>11</sup>Cantwell, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 114.
- <sup>12</sup>DeVoto, "Sinclair Lewis," Saturday Review of Literature, 397.
- <sup>13</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 128.
- <sup>14</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 104.
- <sup>15</sup>Horton, "The Symbol of an Era," North American Review, 386.
- <sup>16</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 104.
- <sup>17</sup>Horton, "The Symbol of an Era," 386.
- <sup>18</sup>Krutch, "Mr. Babbitt's Spiritual Guide," Essays, 38.
- <sup>19</sup>Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 73.
- <sup>20</sup>Schorer, "Method of Half-Truths," from Essays, 50.

<sup>21</sup>In fact, even here, characters with true values are portrayed in the figures of Jim Lefferts, Rev. Pengilly and Philip McGarry; Schorer dismisses them as too minor for consideration. That they are minor is, of course, part of Lewis' purpose.

- <sup>22</sup>Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 77.

<sup>23</sup>We later learn that he has become a lawyer, but significantly as a man of integrity has failed in his attempt to enter the corrupt world of politics.

<sup>24</sup>Rebecca West cited the feebleness of Frank's religious criticisms as evidence of a similar intellectual deficiency in Lewis. However, it is plain that we are meant to see Frank's statements as obviously weak and immature, as McGarry does, this very intellectual immaturity being a major cause of his failure in life.

## Chapter VI:

- <sup>1</sup>Cantwell, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 116.
- <sup>2</sup>Forster, "Our Photography," from Essays, 98.
- <sup>3</sup>Mencken, "Escape and Return," American Mercury, 506.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.



<sup>6</sup>For example, see Dooley in Art of Lewis who similarly regards Dodsworth as "not a successful fusion of novel and satire " (160).

<sup>7</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Dodsworth, 18. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated D.

<sup>8</sup>Millgate, American Social Fiction, 96.

<sup>9</sup>Though it should be noted that a similar indictment of Europe can be found in Lewis as far back as Our Mr. Wrenn.

<sup>10</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 239.

## Chapter VII:

<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature," from The Man from Main Street, 16.

<sup>2</sup>Grebstein, for example, argues in his book that Lewis' inability to write his proposed labour novel after Dodsworth, an activity which occupied his time for several years, is the principal cause of his failure to remain relevant to the new age. Had he succeeded, Grebstein believes the success might have given his career the momentum it needed following his reception of the Nobel Prize. Dooley suggests in Art of Lewis that Lewis' break with his publisher Alfred Harcourt, who "could sometimes control the excesses and exuberances of his impetuous author" (178) may account for the poor quality of his later works.

<sup>3</sup>Hollis, "Revival of Character," from Gardiner, American Novel, 96.

<sup>4</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 124-125.

<sup>5</sup>DeVoto, "Sinclair Lewis," Saturday Review of Literature, 398.

<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers, 297. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated AV.

<sup>7</sup>Geismar, Last of Provincials, 116.

<sup>8</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 189.

<sup>9</sup>Carpenter, "Fortress of Reality," College English, 422.

<sup>10</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Work of Art, 37. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated WA.

<sup>11</sup>Geismar, Last of Provincials, 124.

<sup>12</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Prodigal Parents, 49. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated PP.





<sup>13</sup>Morris, "Critics and the Public," North American Review, 389.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 390.

<sup>15</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Bethel Merriday, 2. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated BM.

<sup>16</sup>Especially in light of Lewis' direct involvement with the theatre, both as playwright and actor, during this period in his life.

<sup>17</sup>Cowley, "Last Flight from Main Street," from Essays, 145.

<sup>18</sup>Hicks, "Sinclair Lewis and the Good Life," English Journal, 273.

<sup>19</sup>Sinclair Lewis, It Can't Happen Here, 87. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated ICHH.

<sup>20</sup>Hicks, "Sinclair Lewis and the Good Life," 273.

<sup>21</sup>See R. P. Blackmur, "Utopia, or Uncle Tom's Cabin," from Essays, 108-109.

<sup>22</sup>This is indeed an ironic effect of the book, especially since subsequent history has revealed that the cruelties and atrocities Lewis envisaged were slight in comparison with actual Nazi brutality.

<sup>23</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish, 317. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated GP.

<sup>24</sup>See Schorer, An American Life, 738-739.

<sup>25</sup>Almost a generation separates them; Cass is forty-one, Jinny twenty-three.

<sup>26</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Cass Timberlane, 31. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated CT.

<sup>27</sup>Schorer, An American Life, 739.

<sup>28</sup>Sinclair Lewis, Kingsblood Royal, 227. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated KR.

<sup>29</sup>Beck, "How Good is Sinclair Lewis," College English, 179-180.

#### Conclusion:

<sup>1</sup>See Geoffrey Moore, "Sinclair Lewis: A Lost Romantic," from Essays, 161.

<sup>2</sup>Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 74.



- <sup>3</sup>Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 74.
- <sup>4</sup>Lippman, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 88.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>See "A Letter on Style," from The Man from Main Street, 188-190.
- <sup>7</sup>Forster, "Our Photography," from Essays, 99.
- <sup>8</sup>West, "Elmer Gantry," from Essays, 45.
- <sup>9</sup>Lippman, "Sinclair Lewis," from Essays, 85.
- <sup>10</sup>Cabell, Some of Us, 70.
- <sup>11</sup>Moore, "Sinclair Lewis: A Lost Romantic," from Essays, 165.

#### Appendix:

<sup>1</sup>See American Life, 439. Schorer quotes both James Branch Cabell and George Jean Nathan as stating that Lewis admitted that he had written often merely to make money and that he saw nothing improper in such activities.

<sup>2</sup>Although the short stories are not discussed, whatever is said about the minor novels applies to them as well, since the motives behind the creation of all Lewis' popular fiction are the same.

<sup>3</sup>The minor novels sold moderately well; the short stories, from all accounts, were quite popular with readers of the Saturday Evening Post and similar magazines.

<sup>4</sup>Lewis, The Man Who Knew Coolidge, /iii/. All subsequent references are to this edition, designated MC.

<sup>5</sup>Dooley, Art of Lewis, 145.

<sup>6</sup>Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis, 109.



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## REQUEST FOR DUPLICATION

entitled SOCIAL CORRUPTION

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(June 8) W. Cude, St. Peter's NS	abstract	W. Cude





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